

Brooklyn Country: Class, Culture and the Politics of “Alternativity”

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ABSTRACT

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This text is based on more than two years of ethnographic research among country music fans in New York City. It specifically addresses what I, and many of my interlocutors call the “Brooklyn country music scene” (or sometimes, the “Brooklyn Country music scene”), a particular nexus of country music activity that was in existence during the time of my research, between the spring of 2005 and the winter of 2007/8. I explore the ideas, themes, practices and social structures that characterized this scene during the time of my participation. And I look into the lives and histories of individual participants, as well as the larger social context(s) in which they, and the scene, operated. Indeed, although this scene of musical practice is at the center of my research and this text, I view it in the widest terms as an entry point into thinking about the unique set of subjects involved, their lives and positionings, their broader ideas, experiences and practices, and where all of this fits in to a larger picture of contemporary American life.

Throughout, I am centrally interested in the ways in which this scene represents not only a set of creative contemporary social and cultural practices, but also a complex engagement with an already symbolically laden social and cultural form: “country music.” A review of the scholarly literature on the genre reveals that country has had a complex and often embattled existence in the United States. With a long history of mixed social and symbolic ties to some version of the rural, white, working class(es) (often, but not always, Southern), country has long been a source, and agent, of both longing and dread, from a wide range of subject positions and historical emplacements.

Various configured as an emblem of (or conduit for) “authenticity,” “tradition,” and “the folk,” or, on the other hand, “commercialization,” “backwardness,” and “trash,” country music has been engaged in range of complex, often highly ambivalent negotiations that speak to a number of different social and cultural conflicts. These have included, according to the literature, those pertaining to race, place, and gender, religiosity and nationalism, and more broadly, modernity, postmodernity, and the progress of global capitalism, among other things. But, *class* has tended to be the persistently central figure, according to this work. In looking at this particular scene, then, I argue that in engaging with country music, the people and music involved also engaged with this complex discursive history, and particularly this discourse about *class*. In this sense, I suggest that for participants in the scene, country music was a source for articulating a broad range of meanings and values, for working through a number of different experienced positionalities and conflicts, but that in a central way, it was a source for thinking about, working on and representing class-related experiences and meanings. Specifically, I suggest that it was a source for negotiating the increasingly fraught category of “middle-class-ness,” and I explore the ways in which this scene provides a revealing example of “alternativity” as a distinctly middle-class structure of feeling, and tactic in the late/neoliberal capitalist United States.

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To Mom and Dad,
and to Chad

Preface

Pseudonyms have been used for all interview texts and fieldwork observations and notes, except where written permission was granted to use a real name. In some cases, unique pseudonyms have been assigned where personally identifiable information is included in the discussion of an interview or of fieldwork, in which case a single individual's story or interview may be identified under different names in the text. Real names have been used where they are already associated with a recording, website, interview, or other publicly available source.

Interview texts have been edited in most cases for readability. False starts, "ums" and "uhs" have been removed without indication. Ellipses are used where more substantial disfluencies, or other text, have been removed for clarity. In each case, I have made every effort to retain both the substance and tone of the original spoken text. Fieldnotes have, where noted, been edited to elaborate on or clarify details not included in the original transcriptions.

Chapter 1: Country in the City

Exiting my apartment building on Classon Avenue, I head south to Eastern Parkway, then west, past the Brooklyn Museum, and down toward the neighborhood of Park Slope. I decide to walk to my destination on Fifth Avenue, despite the one and a half mile distance. There's no direct subway access, and the bus that runs down Eastern Parkway to Union is nowhere in sight. It's close to 7:30, but still daylight in September, and I transfer a heavy peach pie between one hand and the other as I make my way down the hill. The plate is still too warm for transport, but I promised to contribute to the night's door prizes, and I'm running late because the show is already underway.

Approaching Grand Army Plaza, I pass "On Prospect Park," a towering new glass condominium building designed by modernist architect Richard Meier. The building is in a seemingly perpetual state of near completion, and the neighborhood blogs report that its luxury units are still largely unsold, now almost two years into their offering; they're priced too high for the contracting national real estate market, and the neighborhood gossip says that they're going to be secretly rented by the developer in an attempt to mitigate losses. The building is in stark visual contrast to the neighborhood of Prospect Heights to the east, where abandoned lots mix with pre-war low-rises and brownstones in various states of repair, and where long-standing bodegas alternate with upstart coffee shops selling the latest "boutique" blend. The neighborhood is a key site of Brooklyn's contemporary "gentrification," and bears some telltale marks of a much broader set of social and economic shifts underway in the City, and country – not just the large-scale economic "downturn" that is emerging day by day with much drama, but a much longer and quieter movement toward an increasingly polarized populace.

I continue around the Plaza, past the park entrance and the Soldiers and Sailors' Arch, and down into Park Slope proper. Park Slope is a quintessential example of what the locals call "Brownstone Brooklyn," with block after block of sandstone-faced row houses adorned with ornamental doorways, cast iron railings, and, on some streets, functioning gas lights attending the stoops. Looking into lighted windows as I pass, I can see painstakingly maintained crown moldings, and muted oriental rugs - often mixed with more contemporary decorative motifs: a phrase from Rumi painted on the living room wall, or an imposing "mid-century" replica light fixture over the dining room table. The people around me have changed somewhat too. Where Prospect Heights presented a mix of Orthodox Jews, African Americans, black West Indians, and white 20- and 30-somethings – of varying income groups, Park Slope is more homogeneous. Its residents – particularly in this area bordering the park – are overwhelmingly white, with a small smattering of other races/ethnicities. In terms of class, it is almost entirely populated by those in the middle-to-higher end of the

spectrum – highly educated, with refined and esoteric tastes to suit the neighborhood shops and restaurants, and pockets deep enough to afford the high cost of local real estate.¹ I head down Union, and, turning right at Fifth Avenue, I’ve almost reached my destination: Southpaw, a large-capacity indie music venue that opened in 2002, part of a wave of new businesses populating this stretch at the western end of the neighborhood around the same time.

As I approach the club, I see DW outside, leaning against the metal-paneled facade. He’s wearing jeans and a pinstriped blazer, and is smoking and scrolling through text messages on his cell phone. I stop to say hello, and he gives me a quick run-down of the show’s progress so far. They’re off to a late start, but Dock Oscar and the Ambassadors of Love have taken the stage and are about halfway through their set. The turnout is still a bit small, he says, but that’s to be expected on the early end of a seven-hour show. I ask if he’s playing tonight, and he confirms he’ll be doing a few songs with PT’s band later on. I tell him I’m looking forward to hearing it, and that I’ll see him inside, and I walk into the club’s dark corridor, through the metal doors and into the crowd.

Tonight is the annual Brooklyn Country Music Festival. Organizer PT has been busy for months putting things together, squeezing the work in on weekends and breaks from his day job. He’s been negotiating with bands and the venue on payment, mapping out shows and securing necessary equipment, distributing publicity materials and doing press interviews, and lining up volunteers to help run, and document the weekend’s events. The two-night lineup is made up of eleven bands, with a poetry reading, lasso performance, and intermittent country DJ-ing to round things out. As I walk in, Dock Oscar and his band are between songs, and PT is on the mic, playing emcee. He’s wearing a full country getup for the occasion – cowboy shirt, boots and hat – and is holding a can of Budweiser in his free hand. He smiles broadly, and thanks the crowd for coming out – especially those who made it through the previous night’s festivities, which went well past one o’clock. He reminds us that tonight’s events are just getting started, and that they’ve got a full bill of some of Brooklyn’s “finest original country bands” in store, along with a few surprise appearances. And all this, he says proudly, “sponsored by homemade PIE!” PT smirks to himself, and makes an inaudible joke to the musicians on stage. Reprimanding the lull, JB issues a half-ironic directive from the back of the room: “LET’S HEAR SOME FUCKIN’ COUNTRY!” PT raises his beer and laughs, handing the mic off to Oscar, who turns, counts off the band, and launches deftly into the next song.

¹ See, e.g., the New York City Department of City Planning’s profiles of the Community Districts in which these neighborhoods are located for more detail on these characteristics: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/lucds/cdstart.shtml>.

This text is based on more than two years of ethnographic research among country music fans in New York City. It specifically addresses what I, and many of my interlocutors call the “Brooklyn country music scene” (or sometimes, the “Brooklyn Country music scene”), a particular nexus of country music activity that was in existence during the time of my research, between the spring of 2005 and the winter of 2007/8.² With acknowledgment of its shifting and porous character, I identify this “scene” as a loose amalgam of people, places and musics that regularly commingled during the time of my research, and that were often felt and identified as part of a social and cultural unit – a “scene,” a “music,” a “circle,” a “group,” and so on. In this latter sense the “scene” was also imbued with its own (also loose and shifting) set of priorities, rules and boundaries, as I will discuss. I explore the ideas, themes, practices and social structures that characterized this scene during the time of my participation. And I look into the lives and histories of individual participants, as well as the larger social context(s) in which they, and the scene, operated. Indeed, although this scene of musical practice is at the center of my research and this text, I view it in the widest terms as an entry point into thinking about the unique set of subjects involved, their lives and positionings, their broader ideas, experiences and practices, and where all of this fits in to a larger picture of contemporary American life.

Throughout, I am centrally interested in the ways in which this scene represents not only a set of creative contemporary social and cultural practices, but also a complex engagement with an already symbolically laden social and cultural form: “country music.” A review of the scholarly literature on the genre reveals that country has had a

² Some follow-up research was conducted between 2008 and 2011.

complex and often embattled existence in the United States. With a long history of mixed social and symbolic ties to some version of the rural, white, working class(es) (often, but not always, Southern), country has long been a source, and agent, of both longing and dread, from a wide range of subject positions and historical emplacements (Ching 1993, 2001; Ching and P. Fox 2008; Ellison 1995; A. Fox 1992, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2004a, 2004b, 2008; P. Fox 1998; Jensen 1998; Malone 2002[1968], 2002; Peterson 1997; Stewart 1993).³ Various configurations as an emblem of (or conduit for) “authenticity,” “tradition,” and “the folk,” or, on the other hand, “commercialization,” “backwardness,” and “trash,” country music has been engaged in range of complex, often highly ambivalent negotiations that speak to a number of different social and cultural conflicts. These have included, according to the literature, those pertaining to race, place, and gender, religiosity and nationalism, and more broadly, modernity, postmodernity, and the progress of global capitalism, among other things. But, *class* has tended to be the persistently central figure, according to this work. The “self-conscious lowness” Barbara

³ A number of accounts suggest that the “working class” label is often not used among those who tend to be externally identified as such in the United States. In Aaron Fox’s 2004 study of a rural Texas community he identifies as “working class,” for example, his interlocutors primarily use the terms “middle class” or “working people” to describe their position (A. Fox 2004a, 28). The New Jersey factory workers David Halle describes in his 1984 study similarly reject the “working class” label – preferring instead to use the terms “working men” and “working women” (Halle 1984, 202; also noted in Ortner 1998, 7, and Ortner 1989, 169). In academic contexts, “working class” tends to be the more common term to describe individuals or groups with less real or cultural capital, due to its relative neutrality (as opposed to “poor” or “lower class,” for example), and, I would suggest, its ties to a broadly Marxist theoretical tradition. I use the term here largely in this spirit. It is also important to note, however, that it has been argued that the “working class” category tends to imply a range of other subject positionings – most notably, whiteness and masculinity – and that scholarship that uses it has tended to exclude those who fall outside these categories (see, e.g., Kelley 1997; McRobbie 2000[1978]; Scott 1999[1988]). I use it with some trepidation in light of this hegemonic conflation.

Ching (2001) notes in “hard country” music, the “losses” Joli Jensen (1998) tells us were felt by fans when “countryopolitan” traded authenticating “downhome” characteristics for more commercially viable “uptown” ones, and the “abject sublime” logic by which Aaron Fox’s (2004b) Texas interlocutors reveled in country’s “badness,” “consuming” it in “fit[s] of self-assertion mixed with self-loathing,” all reveal the ways in which class, if not the only concern, is a persistently central one in the way country music tends to be thought about, experienced, and made. In some ways we don’t really need the scholarly literature to tell us this. A brief survey of some popular references to and examples of country music makes the point clearly enough. In looking at this particular scene, then, I argue that in engaging with country music, the people and music involved also engaged with this complex discursive history, and particularly this discourse about *class*. In this sense, I suggest that for participants in the scene, country music was a source for articulating a broad range of meanings and values, for working through a number of different positionalities and conflicts, but that in a central way, it was a source for thinking about, working on and representing class-related experiences and meanings. Specifically, I suggest that it was a source for negotiating the fraught category of “middle-class-ness,” and I explore the ways in which this scene provides a revealing example of “alternativity” as a distinctly middle-class structure of feeling, and tactic in the contemporary United States.

The Scene – In Summary

In the years in which I conducted field research, the “Brooklyn Country” scene was made up of a fairly wide array of musicians and bands, as well as their fans, friends,

and promoters, categories between which there was a great deal of overlap. There were approximately twenty bands/acts that I would consider to be relatively central to the scene – they played with and were referenced by other members of the scene most frequently. Approximately ten to twenty additional acts were involved to lesser degrees. This amounted to somewhere around 100 musicians playing in the scene in total; however, when looking at regular scene participation – attending, organizing and/or promoting a broader array of shows and events, in particular – the central group was only comprised of about twenty-five to thirty individuals. There was also a small group of (approximately ten) participants who did not play music, but attended and/or helped to organize or promote events with great regularity – usually those who were good friends, girlfriends/boyfriends, or spouses of one or more of the scene’s central musicians.

The majority of participants in the scene would most likely be identified as racially “white” according to dominant meanings of that category.⁴ There were roughly three times as many men as women involved in the scene, and the majority of participants overall expressed themselves as heterosexual. Most were in their 20s or 30s, though there were a handful of central participants in their 40s, and 50s, and considering a few of the jam session regulars, ages extended beyond this range. Participants drew from a fairly diverse array of backgrounds in terms of geography and family histories, but all spent the bulk of their upbringing in the United States, and the vast majority had migrated to New York City only in their adulthood. I identify my interlocutors broadly as “middle class,” though the terms of inclusion in this category were a bit different in each case.

⁴ Some, indeed, offered identification of themselves as such. Ethnic identifications, when they were called out, were somewhat various. See, e.g., Allen 1994, 1997, Jacobson 1998, Roediger 1991, Sacks 1994, 1998 on the emergence, and changing meanings of racial “whiteness” in American history.

Some combination of education, family background, character of work, salary or wage level, and contemporary lifestyle marked each participant with whom I interacted as on some kind of “middle” ground in terms of class. Most went to four-year colleges, and some had graduate or professional degrees; the vast majority worked in at least mid-level, or relatively “skilled” jobs (as did their parents in most cases); and the broader habitus exhibited within the scene could be generally described as “middle-class.” Participants, for example, typically displayed a relatively broad knowledge about, and well-honed tastes in food, fashion, popular culture, and the arts, including, of course, popular music – of which country was one central part. Though early exposure to country music varied among participants, the great majority had become interested in the music relatively recently – during college, after leaving their hometowns, and/or upon arriving in New York City. Many people had been active in other kinds of music before discovering or turning back to country; punk and, roughly speaking, “indie-rock” were by far the most common genres in this regard.

A majority of the scene’s participants resided in Brooklyn during the time in which I conducted research, occupying a range of neighborhoods concentrated in the northern and western regions of the borough. Many of the scene’s events and venues were located in these same areas, although in this regard the scene was less strictly Brooklyn-based. Shows sometimes took place in Manhattan venues, mostly in the East Village or on the Lower East Side, but there was also a set of locations – almost all large-capacity Barbeque restaurants that featured musical acts in a designated backroom or basement – situated between Midtown and 14th Street.

There was a range of recurring events that served to solidify the “scene” as such, bringing people together on a recurring basis, asserting a regular, if not entirely coherent, public presence, and articulating a (as I’ve said, somewhat loose and shifting) set of musical boundaries and priorities. Perhaps most prominent among these during the time of my research was the CasHank Hootenanny Jamboree (more commonly called “the CasHank”), a monthly show and jam session conceived and hosted by one of the scene’s central organizers. The CasHank took place in the southern Park Slope (“South Slope”) bar, Buttermilk, and for most of its existence, featured a single musician or band for the first hour, followed by an open jam session.⁵ Built around the songs of Johnny Cash and Hank Williams, the session had a “four chords or fewer” rule, and encouraged the performance of songs from “before 1970” (Brooklyn Country Music [a]).⁶ As the first rule indicates (and as I will discuss in detail in Chapter Three), the CasHank was expressly democratic in its ethos, especially as compared to the range of “old time” and “bluegrass” jams available throughout the city, which tended to emphasize instrumental virtuosity and obscurity in repertoire. Perhaps due to this inclusive spirit, the event was extraordinarily popular among musicians and fans alike, packing the venue each month.⁷

⁵ The event’s organizer held a Manhattan version of the CasHank at A.C.E. bar (formerly the Acme Underground) on the Lower East Side for several months, but the event was eventually discontinued due to a low draw; it was often noted that the crowd tended to be larger on stage than off.

⁶ The event’s website went on: “...[and] preferably written or performed by Hank Williams or Johnny Cash or Loretta Lynn or Mother Maybelle or Lefty Frizzell or Hank Snow or Dolly Parton or Willie Nelson or Roy Acuff or . . .” (Ibid.).

⁷ According to some of the CasHank participants, some of the more bluegrass- and old time-oriented musicians they knew disliked this jam precisely for its inclusive aims, desiring a higher level of musicianship and the chance to solo, which was largely

The CasHank was also a key meeting place within the scene: friendships made there sometimes formed the basis for new bands or musical collaborations, and they played a large role in building audiences for participants' own shows.

Another monthly event, the King's County Opry, was held at Freddy's Bar & Backroom in Prospect Heights between 2003 and 2010 (with more sporadic shows thereafter). Hosted by another central organizer of the scene, this event included a free-form song circle, followed by an assortment of (roughly) old-time, country, and bluegrass acts.⁸ For about a year and a half, a Manhattan correlate, the NYC Opry, took place at a set of Lower Manhattan clubs, and included many of the same acts that appeared at the Brooklyn event. This iteration was discontinued, however, due to low attendance, and according to one of its organizers, distaste for Manhattan bookers, who were seen as generally unfriendly and exclusively focused on an event's draw (more on this in Chapter Five).⁹

"Kuntry Karaoke" nights, featuring a live back-up band and a nearly 200-title song list, took place weekly in the Boerum Hill/Gowanus bar, Hank's Saloon for most of

discouraged, and in any case extremely difficult at the CasHank given the large number of participants and fans (which led to a general noisiness), and the poor sound system.

⁸ As I'll discuss in Chapter Four, Freddy's Bar & Backroom closed in 2010 after a bitter eminent domain battle between community groups, the City, and real estate developer, Forest City Ratner, the organization behind the Atlantic Yards complex slated to demolish Freddy's in the process of re-mapping several surrounding blocks. A new Freddy's location was opened in South Slope in 2011 by the original venue's manager, and two of its bartenders.

⁹ In 2010 both the Kings County Opry and the NYC Opry began meeting again, albeit more sporadically, at the Jalopy Theater in Carroll Gardens/Red Hook, Brooklyn.

the years in which I conducted fieldwork.¹⁰ The annual Winter Hoedown increasingly featured bluegrass and old-time bands during its six-year lifespan between 2004-10, but was nevertheless well attended by a number of central scene participants. A day-long event, the Brooklyn County Fair, began in 2007 and was held bimonthly at the Galapagos Art Space in Williamsburg for about a year, when it tapered off in frequency (becoming seasonal, or bi-annual), and moved to a range of other Brooklyn venues. An annual Johnny Cash Birthday Bash drew enormous crowds, first to Lilly's, a remote (and now defunct) Red Hook bar in 2005, and then to Southpaw, a large Park Slope venue from 2006-10.¹¹ And once per year starting in 2004, a handful of the scene's most active participants put together a large-scale Brooklyn Country Music Festival at a range of venues in northwest Brooklyn. The BCMF was usually held over the course of several days (its second iteration lasted a full week), and featured a broad assortment "local," "original" bands (Brooklyn Country Music [c]). The festival was a key event in articulating the existence of a scene as such. The event's organizers tended to highlight its presence in promoting and emceeing the event. On the 2008 event website, for example, the organizer wrote that he: "...founded the Brooklyn Country Music Festival in 2004 to promote the borough's burgeoning original music scene" (Brooklyn Country Music [b]). And at the 2008 event, several key figures in the scene were inducted into the "Brooklyn Country Hall of Fame." In addition to these shows, an array of shorter-run recurring events emerged and disappeared during the time of my research, including the

¹⁰ In this case too, a Manhattan correlate was tried at Arlene's Grocery on the Lower East Side, but was relatively quickly converted into a "Rock n' Roll Karaoke."

¹¹ In 2011 and 2012, the event was held at The Bell House, and in 2012 a second night was added at Littlefield. Both are newer venues located in Gowanus.

Hillbilly Hayride and the Honkytonk Hootenanny, both semi-regular Manhattan-based events, as well as the sporadically held Jug Fest, featuring a handful of local “jug” bands, and the Stompin’ Tom Tribute, a show dedicated to Canadian country musician Charles Thomas Connors.

Apart from these recurring events, the scene was largely characterized by band-based activities. Most of its regular participants played in one or a range of groups. And the broader constellation of participants was almost all made up of composed bands, and their friends and fans.¹² Most musicians took a similar approach to their endeavors in the scene. Bands generally rehearsed with varying degrees of regularity, performed in mostly small, local venues, and, in some cases, did some short-run domestic and international touring, mostly in the northeast United States. Most bands produced a small collection of recordings, and either released them on small, local labels, some of which were started by members of the scene themselves, or, more often, distributed them on their own. That is to say, for most participants, goals and expectations in terms of commercial success or career viability were modest. There was a small group of bands who were explicitly trying for something more, but even these aspirations were relatively moderate: signing with an independent label, or supporting themselves as musicians in one way or another. The majority of participants, however, saw their work in these bands as more of an artistically- or pleasure-driven project than a professional undertaking.

When asked, most of my interlocutors said that they would welcome the opportunity to

¹² The major exception to this would be the larger recurring events, which typically received substantial local press coverage, and drew large crowds of non-regulars. The CasHank also tended to draw sizeable audiences of non-regulars, presumably due to its participatory character, and situation in a neighborhood bar.

play music as a career, but most viewed this as unlikely, and were content with the current parameters of their participation.

As is the case for most contemporary musicians and bands, participants in the scene maintained a substantial on-line presence, via free-standing websites, as well as social networking sites – most prominently MySpace and Facebook. These web components played a significant role in articulating the existence of a scene as such as well. The BrooklynCountry.com and BrooklynCountryMusic.com sites did this in a particularly central way. Expressly dedicated to organizing the scene, these sites (especially in their early iterations) described a wide array of participating bands, listed events across the city, and at times articulated the purported spirit, aims and boundaries of the scene and its music. In its early existence, BrooklynCountry.com, for example, published a “Manifesto” for the scene:¹³

Country Music in Brooklyn?
A message from our founder

New York City is about as un-country as you can get. Forget about any easy living or rocky tops or green, green grass of home. It just don’t get any bigger, louder, or more obnoxious than here, folks.

Yet there’s a growing bunch of us, right here in the middle of the world’s largest city, who like nothing better than to pick up an old guitar (or a banjo, or a mandolin...) and bang out the sort of rugged, twangy music you’d expect to hear in some beery backroads honky-tonk fifty years ago. We come from all parts of the country – men and women, all ages and backgrounds, brought up on all styles of music. The one thing we all seem to share is a love of old-style country music at its rawest, wildest, and most sincere. That ain’t to say that we don’t love plenty of new acts, too, or that we cling too tightly to tradition. We just don’t have much use for big hair, overproduced sessions, or weak-kneed “crossover” sensations – in other words, we dislike most of the watered-down crap that passes for modern mainstream Nashville country... (Brooklyn Country)

¹³ The site changed hands in 2008, and eventually featured a much smaller array of bands, and events. This “Manifesto” was removed at that time.

Individual sites/pages played a major role in articulating a scene as well. Through the use of the “friends” and event sharing features on social networking sites, for example, musicians and participants made their social and musical ties to other members explicit and public. These sites were also a key place for articulating musical preferences, and influences – in band biographies, links to other musicians outside the scene, or in blogs, for example. Of course, they also played a major role in the distribution, promotion, and sales of music and “merch” – listing upcoming shows, providing quotes from or links to press coverage, offering music samples or downloads, selling recordings, t-shirts, and other items, and so on.

Participants in the scene made and listened to musics that related to “country” in a variety of ways, in terms of both the music/sounds themselves, and the explicit discussions of genre and influences that took place. As I’ll discuss in detail in Chapter Three, there was a broad emphasis on “classic” or “traditional” country styles and sounds, with a simultaneous prioritization of “innovative,” “original” music. Genre titles referenced spanned a wide range: “honky tonk,” “old time,” “bluegrass,” “rockabilly,” “outlaw country,” “alternative country,” “roots,” and “americana,” among many others, although, as I will discuss, opposition to many of these was also articulated, and there was a fair amount of resistance to and even refusal of any kind of genre categorization. In this spirit, several participants playfully suggested new titles, such as “whackabilly,” “art country,” or, perhaps most inventive, “Fatback Spo-De-O-De,” apparently in the effort to sidestep such misrepresentation or restriction. As I will also discuss in detail, there was a strong, common aversion to contemporary “mainstream” or “Nashville” country among participants, and indeed to “mainstream,” music more generally. In

addition to this, as I'll discuss in detail in Chapter Five, the treatment of "country," in whatever form, was often ambivalent, sometimes taking a quite earnest, reverent approach, sometimes a highly ironic, even disdainful one.

Choosing a Fieldsite

I chose the Brooklyn Country scene as my primary object of study for a number of reasons. Chiefly, this was the most visible locus of country music practice in New York City when I set out to conduct my primary field research in 2005. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, I had participated as both a musician and fan, in a variety of country music events and activities in New York, and had developed a general familiarity with a range of bands, venues and people. By the time I developed this project, and began conducting the research in earnest, however, I found that many of the people I had met and listened to early on had moved away, stopped performing, or were participating less frequently. A few had become more commercially successful during my time away and were now only rarely playing in New York, focusing instead on domestic and international touring. As I began searching venues' websites, combing through music listings in local magazines and newspapers, and going to my first events of formal research, I discovered that a new array of musicians and bands, indeed a new collection of venues and recurring events had emerged since my last participation. There was some overlap with the scene I had known before: some of the bands were still playing here and there, some of the venues were still in operation, and still booking country, and country-influenced acts with some regularity. But much of what I was finding was quite new. And one of the most defining new features of this emerging scene was that a large

percentage of it was based in Brooklyn: musicians and fans lived there, new venues were coming up there, and there was some very visible new organizing/institutionalization of country music that was explicitly tied to the borough, as noted above. There was also, at this time, a significant amount of local (and some national) press coverage of this emerging site of country music practice.¹⁴

Additionally, the Brooklyn scene was more recently developed, which made it compelling for a number of reasons. As I've hinted above, interest and participation in country in New York seemed to gather in waves: becoming more active for a period of time, and then dissipating. The Brooklyn Country scene was the most recent wave at the time I began fieldwork. This was appealing in that it offered the possibility of following a group of participants through a complete cycle of interest and participation.

Focusing on this relatively distinct scene, however, has meant that I've de-emphasized, and even excluded some local country music practice. Members of older scenes, for example, who still perform outside the social scope of the Brooklyn scene are not a focus here, though there were instances of contact and cross-over that I did cover. I also, for the most part, exclude treatment of contemporary bluegrass and "old time" music practice, except, again, when these practices socially or musically overlapped with the central Brooklyn scene. Here, as I've noted, the range of contacts, and exchanges were more numerous, though clear boundaries were also articulated, on both sides of the divide. Finally, a range of country-related activities across the metropolitan area were mostly not included – most notably, large-scale events featuring out-of-town artists or bands, as well as a range of more dance-focused events that drew mostly distinct groups

¹⁴ See, e.g., Baird 2005, Cowan 2004, Ferris 2008, Kugel 2006.

of participants.¹⁵ In setting these ethnographic boundaries, I followed the limits roughly articulated among Brooklyn country participants: I covered the people, musics, and events they tended to like, participate in, and consider part of their musical landscape.

An Ethnography of “Peers”

Before proceeding, I should also say a few words about what motivated me to explore this topic and scene more broadly, and what my own position was in relation to the scene. As noted above, I was a musician and fan in an earlier iteration of a New York City country music scene before beginning this project – one that took a similar approach to the genre, showed similar influences and priorities, and, as I’ve said, had some practical cross-over with the Brooklyn scene I eventually studied. Specifically, I played the violin in a country-influenced band for three years from 2001-3, and attended a variety of shows and events, both related to this involvement, and not, during that time. I had also developed a broader interest in “classic” and “alternative” country music shortly before this, and had been listening recreationally to a variety of artists and bands, attending concerts, and so on. As a participant in the earlier scene, and these earlier activities, I was struck by the way in which country music seemed to be engaged as a relatively “borrowed,” or appropriated style by many (though not all) of the musicians and fans I met – myself included. That is to say, the genre/style seemed to be a relatively self-conscious choice by most people I met, and most musicians I listened to and saw perform. It seemed to be, roughly speaking, engaged more as an object of “interest” or

¹⁵ For example, the “Big Apple Ranch,” an LGBT “country-western dance” class and party that took place in a Chelsea studio each week, a bimonthly dance in Queens held by the New York Metropolitan Country Music Association, and a range of large dance halls in northeast New Jersey.

“taste” than as part of a long-standing social history on the part of these participants.

And I was curious about the specific shape, and particularly the stakes of that appropriation: What forms of “country music” were being valued? What forms were rejected? What kinds of approaches were taken, and what treatments were used? And to what ends, in terms of the identities, values and social standing of these participants? It was with these questions in mind that I began formulating this project, and designing the research.

One potentially problematic aspect of this positioning with respect to the scene, and subject, is my own social and cultural “closeness” to it. One could argue, on the one hand, that a position of relative “sameness” to one’s interlocutors might mitigate some of the classically-raised problems of ethnographic engagement and representation. Here, one might suggest, the problem of “bias” in perceptual or analytic frame is less likely, and the relationships of power are less charged. I’m sure this was true in some regards in this project, though I would generally argue that due to the deep complexity of “sameness” or “difference” in any intersubjective relationship, these kinds of issues persist in a variety of ways even in a relatively “native” or “peer” engagement like mine. Indeed, in the course of conducting this research, I specifically encountered both subtle and overt discomfort with the authority associated with of my role as ethnographer, and the inevitable objectification involved in the project. A few participants were persistently reluctant to talk, or be interviewed, and occasionally someone would explicitly call me out – typically in the form of a joke or mildly sarcastic remark – apparently in an attempt to unsettle the relationship, and project at hand. (E.g., “Are we creating good

anthropology for you?’’¹⁶ Moreover, the act of interpreting and writing in any ethnographic engagement unavoidably enacts an objectification, and, to some extent, an articulation of distinction from ones interlocutors. As Bourdieu writes: “There is no way out of the game of culture” (1984, 12).

On the other hand, however, a position of relative closeness to one’s interlocutors might also stand to mask a critical perspective to some degree. Inhabiting a similar social and cultural world, sharing experiences, tastes, values, and so on, might, for example, lead a “native” to miss the historical/social/cultural-contingency of certain elements in the ethnographic setting, or to regard her interlocutors too sympathetically. In a project like this one, being a relative “peer” to ones interlocutors might also lead an ethnographic writer to temper critiques she does have due to the likelihood that her research subjects will read the resulting text. I was keenly aware of these possibilities when conducting, interpreting, and writing up the research for this project. And there certainly were times, at each stage, when I struggled with some of these issues. Overall, the text I present here takes a relatively measured tone toward the class- and related politics engaged by participants in the Brooklyn country scene. While I emphasize throughout the numerous and complex ways in which my interlocutors exercised and worked to secure their positions of relative power in terms of class and a range of related social and cultural positionalities, I also point to the ways in which they sought to articulate alliance with or felt relation to people, cultural forms, ideas, values, practices, and so on, that were

¹⁶ On one occasion, one of my interlocutors gently mocked me for taking more documentary-style photographs at a weekly jam session, reminding me that I was “allowed” take pictures in which people were smiling at the camera. Later in the night, he jokingly suggested that I regarded him and his friends as so many “primates.” Though I laughed and apologized at the time, I took this discomfort seriously, and tried to do a better job of balancing my observing and participating thereafter.

relatively subordinately positioned. And I further note – relatively sympathetically - the ways in which my interlocutors themselves sometimes felt disempowered, excluded, and vulnerable, in a variety of ways. My aim in taking this approach was to be attuned to the specific, and nuanced experiences, attitudes, and approaches I saw in the scene, and, particularly, to the subtle, and often *multivalent* politics in play. My hope is that such an approach not only conveys the feelings and practices of my interlocutors relatively accurately, but that it also supports a nuanced view of class- and related politics and power in the U.S. – one that recognizes the ways in which distinction can be mixed with affinity, empathy tinged with disdain, resistance shaded with domination, and so on. I hope that the text effectively bears out these goals.

“Alternative” Country?

Although use of the term was uneven, and sometimes contested among participants, I consider the music that was played, listened to, recorded and performed as part of the Brooklyn country scene to bear a basic resemblance to the broader musical/genre formation of “alternative country.” I briefly survey an array of journalistic and fan sources here, as well as the few existing scholarly treatments of the genre, in the effort to articulate this link, and in so doing, place the “scene” in a wider musical context. I argue that this context is important both in that the development of the broader genre provided some of the immediate motivation or inspiration for some of my Brooklyn interlocutors, but moreover, it is important in thinking about the ways in which both the wider practice of “alternative country” and this Brooklyn “scene” may be emerging from similar social and cultural contexts, and a common historical moment.

The “alternative country” designation (also referred to as “alt.country” or “alt-country”) emerged in the late 1980s to refer to the music being created by a collection of groups across the United States who, broadly speaking, brought some of the sounds and themes of various styles labeled as “classic” or “traditional” country music to an array of purportedly distinct contemporary musical settings, usually associated with “alternative-” or “indie-” rock, as well as its predecessor, punk (all genres marked, at least ideologically, by their opposition to “mainstream” rock or pop music, and often by ties to “independent” record labels, and other institutions).¹⁷ Since the label was introduced, a wide range of additional and related titles have been circulated, including: Insurgent Country, Country Rock, Alternative Country Rock, Roots Rock, Roots Revival, Cowpunk, Gothic Country, Hillbilly Noir, Psychobilly, Psychocountry, Lo-Fi Country, Twangcore and Y’alternative, among many others (e.g., Goodman 1999, v-x; or Peterson and Beal 2001, 233). In 1996 the now-dissolved Gavin Corporation introduced a radio format under the title “Americana” that incorporated a range of musics often simultaneously categorized as alt.country (Goodman 1999, v). The Americana label is often used interchangeably with alternative country, though it is typically thought to incorporate a broader array of “American” musics and musical influences, including, for example, jazz, blues and bluegrass, among others (Ibid., ix; A. Fox 2008). The

¹⁷ The abbreviated “alt.”/“alt-“ titles is usually attributed to the early importance of the Internet among participants in the genre – and particularly to the role of the Internet message groups, “No Depression,” “Postcard” and “Postcard2” in the formation of the burgeoning genre. See, for example, A. Fox 2005, 2008, as well as Steve S. Lee and Richard A. Peterson’s (2004) account of the genre’s most long-lasting listserv, postcard2. David Goodman (1999) notes that the earliest known use of the “alternative country” phrase is in 1985, in the subtitle to the British band Lone Justice’s album *Leather Chaps and Lace Petticoats*, and also credits Gregory Himes with being the “first to use it as a separate category” in his 1994 edition of *Blackwell’s Guide to Recorded Country Music*.

Americana Music Association (AMA) was formed in 1999 as a trade organization to support and promote the genre. The AMA now maintains their own weekly radio airplay chart, in addition to a range of other activities and services.

As difficult to strictly define as any genre is, alternative country's boundaries are, among musicians and fans alike, perhaps particularly uncertain. A survey of some of the published "guides" to the genre is illustrative of some of the key ways in which it has been delineated. On the one hand, these definitions tie the genre to a specific musical history. The Belleville, Illinois-based group Uncle Tupelo is often referenced as the "first" alt.country band. The release of their 1990 album, *No Depression*, is often cited as the genre's groundbreaking event, typically seen as a melding of rock/punk and country sounds and themes. Its title track is a cover of the A.P. Carter song, and the name went on to be borrowed for a listserv dedicated to the album and band's discussion, and eventually, for what was the genre's most well-known, and perhaps definitive, periodical.¹⁸ Just as often, though, the genre is considered to be part of a much longer tradition of "alternative" approaches to or inclusions of country music, with cited examples as diverse as Gram Parsons, and The Mekons' album, "Fear and Whiskey," but also often encompassing an array of (more clearly) country musicians whose music and/or image marked them as "outlaw" figures. Johnny Cash is a key representative here, as are Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings, among others.¹⁹ In this spirit, for example, David Goodman writes in his 1999 "Guide and Directory" to the genre

¹⁸ In 2008, *No Depression* published its last bimonthly issue, after which the magazine's website expanded in scope to include many of the print magazine's features, and its publishers developed a semi-annual "bookazine" in conjunction with the University of Texas Press.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Goodman 1999 and Hinton 2003.

about a forty-odd-year history of “the reinterpretation and enhancement of traditional country music styles, themes, and images by incorporating a variety of modern musical and non-musical influences,” a “movement” that he says developed in (tacit or explicit) opposition to the emergence of “‘countrypolitan’ or the ‘Nashville Sound.’” Goodman, in fact, goes even further back in tracing the origins of this “movement,” tying it to an extended tradition in country music of melding “old” and “new,” “country” and “non-country” styles:

...Throughout the history of country music a number of precedents...had been set: Bill Monroe remade string band music into bluegrass beginning in the late 1930s; Bob Wills combined Eastern swing with country and western in the 1930s-1940s; honky tonkers in Texas and southern California electrified country in the 1940s-1950s; early rockabilly acts like Bill Haley and Elvis melded hillbilly and rock into “Western Beat.” The waves of alternative country that began in the late 1960s and recurred in three subsequent cycles (late 1970s-mid 1980s; late 1980s-early 1990s; mid 1990s-present) built on and redefined these and other country music styles gradually expanding into other musical genres, joining several generations, and crossing geographical boundaries until, in the late 1990s, it was possible to speak of alternative country not just as a tradition but as a full blown musical movement. (Goodman 1999, iii-iv)

Another way these sources tend to define alt.country is through more general descriptions of its ethos, or “spirit.” Here, its relationship to “mainstream” or “Nashville” country music, and the institutional/commercial structures that support it, are often particularly highlighted. In their 1998 “Introduction to Alternative Country Music,” Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock write, for example, that the music they’re concerned with includes: “...permutations of traditional American music for which there is no radio format (Americana comes closest), almost no television coverage and modest distribution” (Alden and Blackstock, ed.s 1998, 8). Or, put another way, they suggest it includes: “...an assortment of artists who are either too old, too loud or too eccentric for

country radio...” (Ibid.). In a subsequent compilation, published in 2005, the two describe the genre this way: “To the mainstream music industry (*O Brother* notwithstanding), [alternative country]...became code for “doesn’t sell”; to fans, it came to describe a network of hard-working bands that fused punk rock’s DIY spirit to country music’s working-class honesty” (Alden and Blackstock 2005, vii). In his “Road Map to Alternative Country,” Brian Hinton says his book tells the story of a wide array of musical examples that are connected by a common opposition: “It traces a series of concentric circles, all united by one thing, an antipathy to what has become the dead hand of the Nashville country-music industry” (Hinton 2003, 9). And, he tells us that this opposition leads to “contemporary musicians delving back into the past to make something brave and new and strange” (Ibid.). Finally, All Media Guide’s music website, AllMusic.com gives a more lengthy (and nebulous) description that also highlights a sonic, thematic and ideological externality to “Nashville”:

Like its cousin alternative rock, Alternative Country exists outside of the mainstream – in this case, Nashville. Taking its cue from "outlaw country" and progressive country, Alternative Country strips country to the basics and then subverts it, both musically and lyrically. The music is hardcore country, and whatever traditional country merely suggests, Alternative Country spells it out explicitly. It is the work of mavericks and outsiders, not conformists, and as such it covers many different styles, from alternative country-rockers to simple singer-songwriters. Often, Alternative Country was used interchangeably with Americana...Although they were considered an alternative radio format, Alternative Country and Americana did not break with country tradition, they embraced it – something, ironically enough, which the music hitting the Nashville charts throughout the era did not do. (All Music Guide)

As is clear in the statements cited above, the prevailing mode of defining alternative country’s “spirit” is in the negative. It is *not* “commercial,” *not* “conformist,” and foremost, it is *not* some version of “mainstream-,” “commercial-,” or “Nashville”

country. On the other side of this construction, the genre is marked as “honest,” “brave,” “traditional,” and at the same time “eccentric” and “new.”²⁰

A third mode of definition found in these sources is a kind of simultaneous embracing of multiplicity, and resistance to being bound by strict parameters. This is evidenced in both the wide range of alternative titles for the music, listed above, and in the diversity of musical sources cited in accounts of the genre’s history. But it is also explicitly articulated in various places. David Goodman, for example, refers to the label as a “big tent,” and Alden and Blackstock talk about what goes on under the title in the plural: “musics” (1999, vii; 2005, vii). The changing masthead of their serial publication, *No Depression*, also often explicitly inserted some kind of de-specifying phrase: “the alt.country (whatever that is) bimonthly” (May-June 2002), or “failing to define alt.country music for eight years” (September-October 2003).²¹ And they elaborate on this subject in their 2005 collection:

“[W]hatever that is” was meant as a blunt reminder that *ND* was the creation of two editors who remain endlessly curious about – and enchanted by – music.

We are not biologists. It is not our purpose to identify, quantify, and codify a subgenus called alt-country, or to limit ourselves to its study. We are writers, minor-league historians, fans; musicians bridle at being categorized, as do we. It *is* our purpose to write and assign articles about artists whose work is of enduring merit. And, yes, those artists have some tangential relationship (at least to our ears) to whatever country music may have been—even to what it may now be. Or, rather, to the musics of our country, these United States. (vii-viii)

²⁰ The treatment/framing of the larger genre, and of the Brooklyn scene are particularly similar in these ways. I will discuss this issue at length in Chapter Three.

²¹ Starting with the September-October 2005 issue, the magazine began running a new standardized masthead: “Surveying the Past, Present, and Future of American Music.” But in the May-June 2007 issue, the qualification returned “Surveying the Past, Present, and Future of American Music (whatever that is).”

In the few existing scholarly treatments of the genre, some suggestions have been made about alternative country participants and some of their characteristic approaches to the music. Based on his experience in the 1990s as a working “top-40” country musician, fan and ethnographer of a largely distinct set of what he elsewhere calls “traditional” or “real” country music practices in Austin, Texas, Aaron Fox suggests that Austin’s alt.country participants tended to be “middle-class,” and to have migrated to Austin “from places like Boston, New York, and San Francisco” (A. Fox 2005, 170). In another text, based on the same experience, he suggests that they tended to *choose* country rather than growing up around it (A. Fox 2008, 97). In their 2001 discographic essay, drawn from a survey of mostly recordings and fan literature identified with the genre, as well as a review of an informal “self-survey” performed by members of the “postcard 2” listserv, Peterson and Beal tentatively suggest that alternative country fans tend to be white, young adults, from a broad geographical range. And they assert that the majority work as “service professionals” (2001, 242-3).

In terms of approach, Aaron Fox observes that Austin’s alt.country participants were typically “urbane” or “cosmopolitan” in sensibility. And, he says, they tended to treat country music in a “historicist” spirit, prioritizing “vintage” recordings, dress, performance styles and technologies, and typically taking an ironic (if simultaneously “respectful”) approach to them (A. Fox 2008, 86, 94-7, 100-1). In his 2005 essay, Fox takes this further to say that the genre more generally has been “defined,” since its inception by a kind of “minstrelization” of, broadly speaking, low-capital sources by high-capital subjects:

Hyper-modern, technologically sophisticated, well-capitalized, urban, cosmopolitan, well-educated deployments of archaic, low-tech, shoestring, rural,

and ignorant images and expressive styles have been definitive features of alternative country since Exene Cervenka and John Doe (as the Knitters) caterwauled grotesque imitations of Kitty Wells and Hank Thompson (both technically polished country singers) in 1985 (on *Radio Tokyo Tapes*, vol. 3, PVC Records).

New heights were reached when Gillian Welch, the daughter of successful television and film composers, and a graduate of the University of California at Santa Cruz, appeared on the cover of her debut album in a plain cotton dress and with a grim expression that evokes a famous Dorothea Lange Depression-era photograph... (Ibid., 183)

As I'll discuss further in Chapter Five, Pamela Fox's (2009) paper on alt.country, and Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching's introduction to their (2008) edited volume on the genre both similarly highlight irony as a key characteristic. P. Fox and Ching suggest specifically that an "ironized conflict between commodification and authenticity serves as [the genre's] truly defining feature" (4). They also argue that the genre is broadly characterized by "a rhetoric taste, ties to country tradition, and the cultivation of a contemporary, discerning community of liberal-minded fans distinct from the audience for mainstream country music" (Ibid.). And several of the authors within this volume expand on these features.

Peterson and Beal describe some of these same characteristics. They note in the albums reviewed, for example, an inclination toward "retro" styles, and a "nostalgic" stance:

... "[S]how clothes" are never worn unless they are the retro outfits of a honky tonker, rockabilly, or stage cowboy that the artist is emulating in his/her music...

... [T]he setting of the song is a rural or small town, with prosaic life problems being invoked to express a nostalgia for or romantic identification with the past...

... [A]lt. country CD jacket art seldom features a photo of the artists. When it does, it is likely to be a photo taken in their youth (preferably in a cowboy outfit) or a slightly out of focus snapshot that a fan might take. Most often the jacket features a picture of buildings, cars, industrial equipment, or other objects from the past... (2001, 236-7)

And they highlight a broad tendency in the albums surveyed to convey “that life was not ‘supposed’ to turn out the way it has...” and to emphasize “working class status and struggle,” which Peterson and Beal suggest may take place in a context of a real disappointment of life- and *class* expectations:

...[L]ife is not working out as planned for many of these artists, even if their origins are not in the traditional working class with which they so strongly identify. After all, this is a generation of artists (the writers are in their late twenties to early thirties) that will be the first not to see their standard of living double in a lifetime, nor will an education or a good job insure their lives’ happy progress into the bourgeois world from whence many of them came... (Ibid., 242)

As brief and preliminary as some of the definitions and observations outlined above are, I reference them here because they hint at some basic congruencies between the larger musical, and socio-cultural formation of “alternative country” and the Brooklyn country scene. First, the range of cited musical influences and sources is similar. As I’ve noted, my interlocutors tended to link their work to “classic,” “traditional” or “old” country styles and artists, in addition to articulating some ties to more recent artists explicitly identified as “alternative country.” As I’ve also noted, the “definitions” of “spirit” and musical/ideological boundaries my interlocutors articulated tended to be loose, but generally oppositional, and in the strongest sense specifically opposed to “Nashville” and “mainstream” music. And, as I’ve stated, there was a notable tendency to resist strict definition, and to embrace a diversity of sounds and styles. In terms of the social composition of the “scene,” I also, as stated, identify my interlocutors in a similar way as these accounts do. I identify them as mostly “white,” “middle class,” in their 20s and 30s, and note that they tended to be relatively mobile geographically – having moved to New York City relatively recently, for example. They also tended, like the Austin

alt.country fans Fox observed, to have chosen to start participating in country music relatively recently – sometimes with early experiences to draw from, sometimes not. Finally, the approach to country I observed in Brooklyn could be called “historicist” or “nostalgic” – the prioritized sounds, styles and themes were often drawn from artists and recordings best known in the 1970s or before. And, as A. Fox, P. Fox and Ching observe, the approach taken to these sources was often a mix of respect and irony, as I discuss in detail in Chapter Five.

At the same time, my ethnographic work revealed a far more complex array of approaches, tendencies and personal histories. Musical sources of inspiration were more various than those outlined in the above descriptions of alt.country. And articulated boundaries were more shifting and complex, as I’ve noted. There were people who fell outside each of the categories identified above. And the approaches taken were both more various, and more nuanced than the above characterizations imply. Still, I make this link to alt.country in the effort to describe a significant part of the larger musical context in which this scene, its participants, its songs, sounds and performances are being produced – to tie this local practice to a larger contemporary musical formation – and to highlight the ways in which this “scene” and the wider “alternative country” formation might be emerging from the same broad socio-cultural, and historical context.

Importantly, the genre title is also by no means foreign to the participants in the scene I address here. Many of my interlocutors did in fact use this term to describe the music they liked and/or made – most often on websites, public biographies, or in

interviews with the press.²² As I will discuss, many also explicitly stated an affinity to the genre when I asked about it directly. Others, however, rejected it outright. For a variety of reasons, which I will address in detail in Chapter Three, some of my friends found that the term did not capture the musics they were interested in listening to, making, helping to promote, and so on. Still, I would suggest that there are significant commonalities between this “scene” and the broader formation, and that making this link is productive for the reasons outlined above.

“Scene” as Object

The use of a “scene” (musical or other) as an object of study has received very little theoretical attention, despite having been used in a variety of works, particularly in the study of popular music. Used in the 1960s and 1970s in a range of sociological texts roughly tied to “subcultural” studies more broadly, it was most thoroughly theorized during this period by John Irwin.²³ In a monograph treating an array of “scenes,” from “fern bars” and disco to the “grand scenes” of hippies and surfers, as well as in a set of essays on the subject, Irwin outlines a number of characteristic aspects of “scenes.” He identifies four of these characteristics as central: 1) the ways in which scenes tend to be made up of, and foster “expressive” activity, 2) that they are voluntary, 3) that they are “available to the public,” and 4) that they highlight “an emergent urban psychological

²² One might suggest that the title was used strategically in such places, where marketing was a key concern.

²³ Futrell, Simi and Gottschalk (2006) cite Ned Polsky’s *Hustlers, Beats, and Others* (1967) and Sherri Cavan’s *Hippies of the Haight* (1972) as texts employing the terminology of “scenes” in this era (278).

orientation—that of a person as ‘actor,’ self-consciously presenting him- or herself in front of audiences” (Irwin 1977, 23).

Irwin goes on to explore the contours of different types of urban American “scenes,” further specifying their development, functions and characteristics, and theoretically elaborating the four aspects outlined above. He asserts, for example, that “scenes” function as “lifestyles,” or sets of meaningful, and instructive ideas and standards for “modern urbanites,” who he sees as simultaneously alienated and empowered, lacking the social bonds and cultural systems fostered by the “acculturating institutions” of family, work, community, and so on, and at the same time freed by their detachment from these structures (as well as a newfound affluence):

It’s my contention that more and more modern urbanites recognize and then embrace lifestyles of real or postulated groups. These lifestyles not only contain the bare outlines of an overall life design, but also a world view, an identity for the individual member, a repertoire of values, beliefs, and tastes, and a set of guideposts for deciding particular acts and future career paths. (56)

And he discusses at length the characteristics of a new social “actor.” Drawing from Erving Goffman’s “dramaturgical” approach to social activity, Irwin argues that modern urban subjects, freed from former constraints, and aware of the “cultural diversity” newly present and available to them, feel “conscious” of themselves “in the presence of others,” and compelled to perform, to “construct action with the intention of conveying certain impressions about themselves” (57, 195). The “scene” is a key site for this type of action, he says.

Interestingly, Irwin argues that this type of activity, and the “folk” terminology of “scenes” both emerged during the so-called “post-war boom” in the United States – a period following the Second World War marked by a robust national economy, and a

relative surge in income and opportunity, as well as optimism, for a large number of Americans (more on this in the next chapter). Irwin writes:

There are immediate reasons why expressive leisure activities have become so important in the lives of modern urbanities, particularly young Americans. First, there has been a loss of central, overriding societal purpose. Second, the general prosperity which followed World War II has actually and conceptually released hundreds of thousands of people from the mundane, “work-a-day” life and supplied them with leisure time and money to spend on expressive, entertaining activities. (1977, 24)

Noting that “leisure and expressive activities” have been engaged in a somewhat similar way at various points previous to this post-war moment, especially during periods also marked by “lulls in the national purpose and relative prosperity,” Irwin also configures “scenes” as a kind of “middle class” phenomenon. Whereas “leisure pursuits” have typically been engaged, he says, by the “elite” and “demi-monde” “strata of the city,” freed or denied as they are from more “‘instrumental’ activities,” during periods of widespread affluence, “‘ordinary’ middle-class persons” have turned en-masse to such pursuits, forming the kinds of groups he considers to be “scenes.”²⁴

²⁴ In framing the concept in these ways, Irwin, in one sense reveals his own historical and scholarly positioning: he is in many ways in line with a range of immediately preceding (largely sociological) texts treating the so-called “affluent society,” its characteristics, and its woes, where the “lonely crowd” and “organization man,” beset with both newfound wealth and an alienated relationship to their labor, crave social contact, and meaning. Irwin notes, for example, that:

Our contemporary American urban society has been fragmented. Work has been devalued as a meaningful and essential human collective endeavor; society and its institutions have been demystified; most contacts between persons are specialized and impersonal, and people’s lives are divided into little compartments; most people have more material wealth and leisure time than ever before. These factors have created another problem which many urbanites are trying to solve with a different version of the scene.

There is a recognized universal human need for a collective life design...
(51)

Following Irwin's delineations, "scene" continued to be used to describe a wide range of (usually expressive or "artistic") phenomena, but the concept itself was very rarely brought into analytic focus.²⁵ Communications scholar Will Straw, has engaged in the most sustained critical treatment of the term since that time, taking up the notion at some length in a range of essays published between 1991 and 2004.

In these essays, Straw's primary focus is on the term's utility, especially as opposed to a range of theoretical alternatives, in capturing certain kinds of what he calls "postmodern" practice. He is particularly focused on *music* scenes, but theorizes the term for more general use. In his first intervention on the topic (1991), Straw is primarily concerned with rethinking the notion of "community" in theorizing musical activity that takes place in contemporary contexts that are characterized by social and ideological "disruption and fragmentation" (369). He argues that the notion of a "musical community" usually refers to a "relatively stable" group of participants whose practice

See, e.g., Galbraith 1958, Mills 1951, Riesman 1961 and Whyte 1957 for more on this body of scholarship.

²⁵ The notion has been engaged to some degree in some of the ethnographic studies that employ it – e.g. Cohen 1991 and Shank 1994. In their (2004) edited volume on the expanding "diversity" of the "music scene," Richard Peterson and Andy Bennett also briefly discuss the notion's contours and theoretical utility. For example they particularly highlight the term's theoretical advantages relative to the notion of "subculture":

We use the term "scene" here rather than "subculture" because the latter term presumes that a society has one commonly shared culture from which the subculture is deviant... In addition, we avoid "subculture" because it presumes that all of a participant's actions are governed by subcultural standards, while the scene perspective does not make this presumption. To be sure a few at the core of the scene may live that life entirely, but, in keeping with a late modern context in which identities are increasingly fluid and interchangeable...most participants regularly put on and take off the scene identity.... (3)

None of these accounts, however, theorize the concept at length, nor do they depart significantly from Irwin and Straw, so I have not included a discussion of them here.

“takes the form of an ongoing exploration of one or more musical idioms said to be rooted within a geographically specific historical heritage” (373). In such groupings, he says, the “sense of purpose” is typically drawn from an “affective link” between contemporary practice and a specific “musical heritage” that marks current participation as “appropriate” (1991, 373). But Straw wants to argue that in contemporary settings, and especially in urban ones, “a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization” (1991, 373). The notion of “scene” is, he says, more appropriate here because it captures some of the indeterminacy and flux that characterizes the practices and contexts to which it refers, while at the same time emphasizing the ways in which larger “purpose” and “affective alliances” continue to be articulated in these settings. He explores both “alternative rock” and “dance music” scenes in some detail in the effort to elaborate the specific characteristics of these musical contexts, and the “logics of change” that have characterized their development, concluding that the crucial element identifiable in these scenes is the way in which they are based around, and contribute to constructing new social boundaries: “The important processes, I would argue, are those through which particular social differences...are articulated within the building of audiences around particular coalitions of musical form” (384). In this sense, Straw is advocating for a new approach in popular music studies, that is not only interested in the “disruption and fragmentation of cultural communities” in the postmodern era, but also in the people involved in the processes causing that “disruption,” and the social and cultural meanings, values and alliances they formulate:

The risk remains that an emphasis on the disruptive effects of economic reordering will result in the valorization of musical practices perceived to be

rooted in geographical, historical and cultural unities which are stable and conflated. Popular-music scholars and analysts of the cultural industries have generally been less attentive to way in which this same system of articulation is produced by migrations of populations and the formation of cultural diaspora which have transformed the global circulation of cultural forms, creating lines of influence and solidarity different from, but no less meaningful than those observable within geographically circumscribed communities. (369)

In his 2002 essay, Straw theorizes the concept in more general terms (to refer to both musical and non-musical contexts), and articulates its broader utility in greater detail. Noting the diversity that characterizes both popular and scholarly uses of the term, where it can refer to: "...both the effervescence of our favourite bar and the sum total of all global phenomena surrounding a subgenre of Heavy Metal music" Straw highlights, on the one hand, the term's "flexibility," its ability to refer to a range of differently defined spaces, clusters of activity, and groups of people, and especially the *movement* that occurs within and between these entities (Straw 2002, 248):

Is a scene (a) the recurring congregation of people at a particular place, (b) the movement of these people between this place and other spaces of congregation, (c) the streets/strips along which this movement takes place...(d) all the places and activities which surround and nourish a particular cultural preference, (e) the broader and more geographically dispersed phenomena of which this movement or these preferences are local examples, or (f) the webs of microactivity which foster sociability and link this to the city's ongoing self-reproduction? All of these phenomena have been designated as scenes. (Straw 2002, 249)

Straw emphasizes that the term is particularly apt in this sense when used for the analysis of clusters of expressive practice that take place in geographical spaces characterized by high levels of diversity and change, such as urban environments.²⁶ As opposed to such

²⁶ Certainly, one could qualify here that the kind of "flux," and "diversity" Straw emphasizes in his characterization of urban environments is, on the one hand, not exclusive to those environments, and, on the other, has become increasingly characteristic across a broader array of geographical areas with the expansion of digital "information" flow. (Though, of course, access to that information, and the media delivering it is highly

concepts as “class,” “subculture,” and even “culture,” which have been criticized for their “fixity,” Straw argues “scene” allows for the theorization of multiple, fluid processes, while still productively maintaining the “promise” of “rearticulating” the kinds of “unities” these terms have tended to describe:

At the same time, “scene” seems able to evoke both the cozy intimacy of community and the fluid cosmopolitanism of urban life. To the former, it adds a sense of dynamism; to the latter, a recognition of the inner circles and weighty histories which give each seemingly fluid surface a secret order...The concept of scene steers us towards spaces marked by...levels of intimacy, without requiring that we view them nostalgically, as remnants of a pre-urban world. (Straw 2002, 248-9)

He wants to argue, in fact, that “scenes” themselves represent a “slowing” of the flux that characterizes postmodern, urban settings, that they can be seen as periods or spaces in this movement where experience is negotiated, and meaning is made:

Against a seductive sense of scenes as disruptive, I would nevertheless insist on their capacity to slow the turnover of urban novelty. Scenes are, much of the time, lived as effervescence, but they also create the grooves to which practices and affinities become fixed. (Straw 2002: 254)

I use the “scene” label throughout this text for a number of reasons. In part, I use it simply as a kind of shorthand, a recognizable term for which most readers will have some frame of reference, some analogous example in mind. I additionally use the term because it was, as noted, sometimes explicitly used among my interlocutors. But moreover, I also find some of the theoretical arguments in favor of the concept compelling for this case. In attempting to describe and theorize my object here, I have struggled with the utility of a range of proposed concepts. The social and cultural world I am trying to capture here bears some similarities to the ways “subculture” has been

inconsistent as a result of social and economic, political and geographical limitations, among others.)

delineated and used (e.g., Gelder and Thornton 1997). It is comprised of a small group of people, characterized by a common interest. It is relatively transient – its composition is not stable, and it takes place more broadly in an urban environment characterized by great social and cultural diversity and movement. But its other similarities are a less comfortable fit for the “subcultural.” This nexus of music practice might be described as a kind of “youth” culture, but its participants not *so* young. They, and their musical practice, are also not posed in generational opposition, as phenomena described as “subcultures” have tended to be. There *is* an oppositional component here, but as I’ll discuss, it is a relatively multivalent, and ambivalent one – articulating distinction from a variety of opposites, in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. This music practice is also defined, in a sense, by a common class (and, for the most part, racial/ethnic) positioning, and by an active working-through of that positioning. But here, that positioning is not (or not clearly/consistently) subordinate. In light of these characteristics, I find the “subculture” label ill fitting.

I might also use the unqualified term “culture” to describe this object (e.g., in the form of a “music culture”). As I’ve outlined above, this “scene” was recognized by my interlocutors, in one way or another, it was felt, and guarded as a kind of social and cultural unit. And it was imbued with a range of meanings and values. In this sense, this object might be argued to be characterized by, or as, a distinct “web of meaning.” But at the same time, these meanings and values seemed, on the one hand, to show important congruencies with larger “webs.” My emplacement of this scene within the larger musical context of “alternative country,” and moreover, my argument that this scene reveals a broader tendency – a structure of feeling and tactic – that is characteristic of the

contemporary American middle-class(es), is meant to emphasize this. And, on the other hand, they also seemed to have a relatively ephemeral existence in this particular iteration – the social and cultural activity I describe here was relatively short-lived for most of its participants, and it comprised only one (sometimes relatively small) part of their daily lives, which were occupied by a range of other contexts and practices, other values and “webs.”

The notion of “scene” nicely captures both the way in which this example might be seen as one instance of a something larger, something that is evidenced in a range of other domains or “homologous” practices, and the relatively momentary quality of this example.²⁷ In this sense, I find Straw’s formulation useful. Irwin’s emphasis on the performative aspect of “scenes” (and the appropriateness of the terminology in light of it) is also useful in this case, as it, in a sense, puts human practice at the forefront of how such formations work. As I detail in the following chapter, this configuration is key to how I understand this “scene,” as well as some of the larger structures and “webs” at work here.

A Note Regarding My Focus on Class

Before proceeding, it is important to mention that, in foregrounding class in the analysis of the Brooklyn Country scene, I do not mean to downplay the importance of other difference categories, other systems of meaning here, or to frame class as somehow more essential. Indeed, as I will discuss in the next chapter, I see class as deeply enmeshed – and indeed often mutually constitutive – with these other categories and

²⁷ I reference Bourdieu (1984) in using the language of “homologous” practices here.

systems. And with this approach in mind, I attempt throughout the text to highlight these kinds of intersections in my analysis. I did, however, find that an emphasis on class was ethnographically motivated in this case, and this has meant that other categories receive relatively less theoretical attention here. I would particularly note that race, and specifically racial whiteness, are less of a focus in the analysis presented, which was something I questioned and struggled with in both analyzing my data, and writing the text, especially because country music is so dominantly identified with racial whiteness (among other things), and in particular with a range of racialized *politics*. As I'll discuss, I see "middle-class-ness" in particular in the United States as in many ways inextricable from racial whiteness. And moreover, as I'll note, many of the other class categories (or pseudo-class categories) that were called up in the Brooklyn country scene were, in one way or another, significantly racially coded as white. As I point out throughout the text, some of the class maneuvering that I describe carried a concomitant racial component: where, for example, articulations of class "distinction" seemed to involve a kind of expression of distance from not just a class inferior, but from a version of racial whiteness that was viewed as distasteful or objectionable – or out of step with the hegemonic conflation of whiteness and middle class standing. In my interpretation, however, the class discourse (however submerged in its own ways) was consistently underscored. It is therefore the focus of my analysis.

This Text

In Chapter Two, I present some of the theoretical foundations of my analysis of the Brooklyn Country scene. On the one hand, my analytic focus on class requires a

delineation of how I use the category, particularly given the large degree of variety, and opacity with which it has been put forth in the academic literature. Its inclusion in an anthropological text perhaps requires particular explication, given the relative infrequency of its use in the discipline. In the next chapter, I provide such a delineation and elaborate on the ways in which I will employ the concept in this text. Looking at a range of works that emphasize the “cultural” (as well as “the subject”) in various ways in their uses of “class,” I outline my own theoretical approach. My use of the “middle class” category requires some additional explanation. Operating as the hegemonically unmarked class positioning in the United States, it is assumed to be the “ordinary” position, and indeed, is the one with which the vast majority of Americans identify. But its lack of specific boundaries and meanings can be quite confounding. *Because* it stands in for the ordinary, that is, we hardly know what is meant in its invocation: Who, specifically, does it refer to? And what are the terms of inclusion? The fact that middle class subjects rely so heavily on cultural capital for their standing adds another layer of uncertainty, due to the slipperiness of its value, and the fact that it cannot be reliably saved or passed down. Finally, recent shifts in the social and economic structure of the United States have only compounded this confusion and insecurity, driving the middle class more and more towards its poles, and leaving the category’s boundaries that much more uncertain. In the second half of Chapter Two, I address the specific notion of the “middle class,” its recent history and attendant anxieties, and I delineate how I use it in thinking about my Brooklyn interlocutors. Chapter Three details the complex discourse about musical “taste” that scene participants engaged, its key characteristics, and the implications of this discourse for the negotiation of class and other categories within the

scene. Chapter Four looks at the ways in which themes of “country” and “city” are deployed and negotiated within the scene. First outlining broad tendencies in their use, I go on to look in detail at the ways in which Brooklyn was configured along these lines, as the geographic and symbolic context for the scene. Here again, I highlight the class politics involved in this construction, while also investigating a broader set of meanings and negotiations being engaged. Chapter Five explores two broad recurring approaches to “country” taken by my interlocutors: the ironic, and the sincere, which were often closely interplayed in individual performances and treatments. This ambivalent stance with regard to the genre/figure, I suggest, captures a broader ambivalence about class positioning, among other things. In Chapter Six, I close with an exploration of the ways in which “alternativity” might be broadly understood as a characteristically middle-class structure of feeling, and tactic for negotiating class in the contemporary United States. And I discuss how the dynamics I highlight within the Brooklyn Country scene might be useful to understanding a much wider array of “alternative” cultures and practices that have emerged in the United States in recent years.

Chapter Two: Class, Middle-Class-ness and the Politics of “Alternativity”

As a category for social and cultural analysis, “class” has been among the most diversely theorized and hotly contested. Particularly in the last forty to fifty years, marked as they have been by a range of large-scale economic, political and intellectual transitions, class scholarship has produced a wide variety of models for the term’s meaning, and great debate over its continued utility. In this chapter, I survey some of the recent work that I find to be particularly useful, highlighting a set of texts that extend the theoretical possibilities, and analytic utility of “class” through appeals to concepts of “culture” and of the acting “subject” in one way or another. I then go on to outline my own approach to the category for the purposes of this study.

Following this, I turn to an exploration of the American “middle class,” as the key class category I will use in discussing the Brooklyn country scene. I outline the hegemonic status of “middle-class-ness” in the recent social and cultural history of the United States, and detail some of the challenges American subjects have been argued to face in feeling and articulating middle class belonging. I then go on to present a number of arguments about the larger material or structural challenges “middle class” subjects have confronted in the last thirty to forty years in the United States, arguments about the “shrinking,” or “polarization” of this all-important middle class in recent years. It is in these broad contexts that I frame the articulation and negotiation of class (and related) meanings in the Brooklyn country scene.

Class in recent theory

Class theory has shifted rather dramatically in the last forty to fifty years. On the one hand, in recognition of a range of shifts in the structure of capitalism – the ways in which, many have argued, it has evolved beyond its “classic,” “modern,” “industrial” or “organized” form – many theorists have questioned the continued applicability of a set of models for class that were developed to describe the concept in an earlier historical phase. The “globalization” of western economies and the shift of the geographical location of production has been particularly noted in this regard, as has been the attendant expansion of the so-called “service sector” in these economies, and the rise of a “new,” “managerial,” and/or “professional” “class.” In addition, the new importance of consumption in this era, as both a large-scale industrial focus and as a factor in the development of class identity, has been highlighted. Along with these broadly “economic” shifts, the disappointment of Marx’s predictions for a revolutionary working class – indeed what many consider to be a “collapse” of communism worldwide – has presented its own challenges to “classical” class theory. If, that is, the large-scale development of a political opposition between labor and capital, and the revolutionary resolution of that conflict are not historical inevitabilities, many have argued, what do we make of the tradition of class theory predicated on such notions. Finally, the broader intellectual shifts that have marked this period (themselves influenced in important ways by the economic and political changes noted above) have contributed to the transition in class theory. Since roughly the 1960s, a range of academic concerns, topics and theoretical categories previously isolated based on disciplinary distinctions have been brought into complex relation. As Dirks, Eley and Ortner (1994) tell us, treatments of

“culture,” “power” and “history” have become complexly intertwined in this period, across the humanities and social sciences, bringing radical shifts in the approach to each, and an array of new domains of study. These larger movements have influenced the way class has been studied as well, and an array of new sites and practices, new subjectivities and epistemologies have been taken up.²⁸

The combined result of these broad transformations has been a diverse body of work that variously argues against notions of historical inevitability, the “two great classes,” classes as “groups,” the primacy of production, work, and the economic more generally in the theorization of class, and the absolute primacy of class as a social force and cultural category. New models for “class structure” have been proposed, new, often more uneven and partial models for class “formation” put forth. Objects of study as diverse as language, comportment, feeling, as well as a wide range of everyday and “expressive” practices have been engaged. Attention to the intersections and indeed mutual constitution of class with other categories of difference – gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and so on – has been newly emphasized. One common and, to me, particularly interesting tendency within this broad body of work has been the incorporation of a notion of “culture” in some way, and (often as part of this) the extension of the role, and possibilities of an acting “subject” in theorizing the ways in which class exists, and operates in social and cultural life.

²⁸ For more on these various shifts, see, e.g.: Crompton, Devine, Savage and Scott 2000; Dimock and Gilmore 1994; Ehrenreichs 1979; Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2000; Giddens 1973; Joyce 1995; McNall, Levine and Fantasia 1991; Ortner 2003, and Poulantzas 1974.

Class and Culture

Before outlining some of the ways in which “culture” has been recently brought to the theorization of class, it is important to note first that class theory has long involved incorporations of what might be called “the cultural.” Traces of such a notion, indeed, marked the work of both of class’s most influential early theorists. Marx’s theory of alienation and the emergence of class consciousness, his notions of ideology and interest, are all centrally concerned with the formation of meanings and values.²⁹ And, certainly, his historical portraits include rich description of specific movements in these domains. Indeed, all of the accounts discussed here, to one degree or another, appeal to precisely these areas of thought in their attempts to bring “the cultural” to the study of class. Max Weber’s proposal (1978, 1999) of “status” as a relatively discrete, but overlapping, “order” to that of “class,” and his accentuation of the notion of “prestige” has been similarly influential. His extended discussion (2002(1904-5)) of the complex relationship between Protestant ideas, values and doctrines, and the development of European capitalism also had important implications for a union of the concepts of class and culture. Though it does not systematically address the issue of “class,” the text provides a compelling argument for the need to attend to the realm of intersecting value and meaning systems in the analysis of economic life and structures.³⁰ Each of these texts

²⁹ As has been frequently noted, Marx never explicitly theorized the category of “class” – famously leaving the task unfinished in his third volume of *Capital* – but his broader work is without question the most influential in the way the concept has been used and understood in social and cultural theory.

³⁰ The “ethic” does appear, however, to be best adapted by members of the “middle-“ and/or “ruling” classes here. Weber, indeed, begins his argument with the observation that: “... people who own capital, employers, more highly educated skilled workers, and more highly trained technical or business personnel in modern companies tend to be, with

reveals its legacies throughout the class literature in different ways, and is explicitly picked up in some of the texts discussed here. All of this is to say: I do not mean to argue that this line of study is entirely *new* – just that it has been newly, and importantly, extended.

In recent years, there have been a range of approaches taken in the broad effort to marry “class” and “culture,” and most theorists use more than one. Perhaps the most common move has been a turn to “cultural forms” or “-objects” as sites for interpreting class experience, “consciousness,” meaning, or struggle. This approach has been posed in a quite wide variety of ways – with scholars defining such “forms” or “objects” as ideas, values and feelings, or as traditions, expressed forms and practices.³¹ A large number of recent works look to “expressive” practice and “popular” cultural forms in particular, and here, much of the work coming out of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) has been quite influential.³² Another common approach is to incorporate a notion of “culture” as a structuring force, which is often posed as a kind of counterweight to the material or economic “structures” traditionally

striking frequency, overwhelmingly *Protestant*” (3). And this theme appears throughout the text.

³¹ E.g., Bettie 2003; Bourdieu 1984; Breines 1992; Eckert 1989; Foley 1990; A. Fox 2004a; Gregory 1998; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 2002(1979); McRobbie 2000(1978); Ortner 1989, 1998a, 1998b, 2003; Rubin 1976; Scott 1988; Sennett and Cobb 1972; Steedman 1986; Stewart 1996; Thompson 1963; Willis 1977.

³² E.g., Hall and Jefferson, ed. 1993(1975); Hebdige 2002(1979); McRobbie 2000(1978), Willis 1981(1977). The CCCS theorists tend to articulate some continuity with the work of Raymond Williams in their theoretical configurations, a central figure in this broad movement in his own right for his important extended attention to the problem of “mediation” between “social” and “cultural” life under capitalism. Williams’s (1977) rearticulations of Gramsci’s notions of “ideology” and “hegemony” and his theorization of their relationship to “culture” show their influence throughout the range of class and culture literatures discussed here.

viewed as having the greatest influence in the formation and experience of class. As I will discuss in detail, Gareth Stedman Jones (1983) and Joan Wallach Scott (1999(1988)), for example, look at language as a system of meaning with great power to structure class experience and formations. And a final trend is to theorize and describe distinct “class cultures” in various ways (e.g., Bettie 2003, Bourdieu 1984, Foley 1990, A. Fox 2004a, Stewart 1996, Willis 1977). Differently defined in each case, the notion of “class culture” is typically meant to capture a unique set of meanings, values, and practices that both arise centrally out of class-based experience and conflict, and are seen as somehow central to a class-bounded group’s identity. I would now like to turn to a detailed examination of three accounts in this broad movement. Although they tend to incorporate more than one approach, or version of “culture” in their theorization of class, each particularly highlights one of the above tendencies. A close examination of these texts is instructive in terms of understanding, with greater subtlety, what such expansions can mean for the theory of class.

Thompson

...[C]lass is a cultural as much as an economic formation...

– E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*

Identified as a seminal text by many of the authors mentioned above, E.P.

Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* traces the development of a “working-class” “consciousness,” and of an identifiable “working-class” movement in early modern England. Tracking a wide variety of factors: ideas, texts, institutions,

practices, influential figures, and unique instances, he depicts a long and deeply complex process through which these broad social formations emerged.

Thompson calls this grand process the “making” of the English working class in the interest of making two primary theoretical assertions: 1) that class comes into being through real social actors in historical relationship to one another, and, what is an extension of this, 2) that it is the specific “experiences” and “consciousness,” or “feeling” and “articulations” of these actors (in response to their relationships) that give “class” any “objective” existence it may have. That is, he places positioning in the relations of production at the center of his model, but suggests that whatever commonality may exist to create such a thing as “class” or “a class” can only take shape in this “experience” and these “articulations.” And for him, this is the essence of how “class” functions in the social world – as something that is more lived and expressed than objectively “existent.”

As he writes:

There is today an ever-present temptation to suppose that class is a thing...“It”, the working-class, is assumed to have a real existence, which can be defined almost mathematically – so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production...

“It” does not exist...

Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition. (10-11)

And:

...[C]lass happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared) feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. (9)

“Consciousness” is, then, the place to look for “class” in Thompson’s model.

This means two things for the inclusion of the “cultural” here. 1) Class is to be studied through the analysis of what might be called “cultural” forms:

The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. (9-10)

Such forms are where “consciousness” is evidenced for Thompson. And he makes his task the interpretation of that consciousness out of those forms. This makes up the bulk of his empirical work, where common ideas such as the “Englishman’s birthright,” and literary texts such as *Pilgrim’s Progress*, for example, are the material in which Thompson seeks the emerging manifestation of “class.” And 2) In taking these specific forms, class feeling is understood to interact with a larger set of meanings, values, and traditions. It is in this sense, paired with his emphasis on unique historical interventions, that Thompson asserts the contextual variability of class consciousness:

If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. We can see a *logic* in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any *law*. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in *just* the same way. (10)

Here, one either is “born,” or enters “involuntarily” into their position in productive relations. And these relations are heavily “determining” in this sense. But where variability does exist is in the specific form class consciousness takes in any particular context. For example, in his final chapter, Thompson discusses the important role of the broader movement of popular Radicalism as “a *political* consciousness,” an intellectual movement that brought the “industrious classes” into ideological opposition with “the unreformed House of Commons” (712). Or, in the same section, he points to the

increased presence of working-class social organization around press control, a unique configuration of the idea of the “free-born Englishman,” and he explores the style and influence of various specific journalists and groups here (e.g., Cobbett, Carlile, the trade unionists), highlighting the ways in which each contributed (and sometimes failed to contribute) to the mobilization of a working-class-based opposition to “aristocratic” rule.

We might say, then, that “culture” appears here both as the medium through which “class” experience makes itself known: a set of “expressions” of that experience, and as a set of values, meanings, institutions, customs, and so on, that are seen to interact with that experience, giving it its specific configurations in a given time and place. “Class” might be said to be interpretable primarily *through* “culture” here, as well as, in a different sense, to act *within* it. This is a radical shift for the analysis of class. And though his second configuration of the concept is left relatively undefined, the broad emphasis on class’s essential embeddedness in a broader realm of meaning, value, and practice has been widely influential.

Of course, “the cultural” is afforded relatively little determinative force of its own in this model: expressions of class experience are colored by their cultural context, and take shape in cultural forms, but these contexts and forms do not fundamentally affect class *experience* in turn. “Experience” is, indeed, itself a notion that is similarly left untheorized in Thompson’s model. This is an issue explicitly taken up by Gareth Stedman Jones and Joan Wallach Scott.

Jones and Scott

In his influential collection of essays, *Languages of Class* (1983), Gareth Stedman Jones broadly aims to rethink what he categorizes as a Marxist model of class history in 19th and 20th-century England. As he specifies in his introduction, the essays can be divided into two modes. His earlier interest, he tells us, was in countering a “simple empiricist approach” that he saw to be dominant, and incorporating a critical stance toward “received social theory” in the attempt to rethink the relationship between the “social” and the “political,” the “cultural” and the “ideological” that is suggested by a Marxist model (7). His later work, he says, moves toward a radical questioning of the “determining role of the ‘social,’” suggesting a much more multi-directional model of class-formation, and emphasizing the possibility of multiple simultaneous discourses about, and social constructions of, class groupings. He writes:

...I became increasingly critical of the prevalent treatment of the “social” as something outside of, and logically – and often, though not necessarily, chronologically – prior to its articulation through language. The title, *Languages of class*, stresses this point: firstly, that the term “class” is a word embedded in language and should thus be analysed in its linguistic context; and secondly, that because there are *different* languages of class, one should not proceed upon the assumption that “class” as an elementary counter of official social description, “class” as an effect of theoretical discourse about distribution or production relations, “class” as the summary of a cluster of culturally signifying practices or “class” as a species of political or ideological self-definition, all share a single reference point in an anterior social reality. (7-8)

As his essays progress, that is, Jones tends to increasingly emphasize “class” as a “discursive rather than as an ontological reality” (8). He wants to work against the tendency found in many of the existing social histories of class (including Thompson’s) to propose a relationship of “simple expression” between “experience” and “consciousness” and to emphasize instead “the problematic character of language itself”

(20). More specifically, he wants to emphasize the “materiality” of language – its power to *structure* experience.

In two of his later chapters: “Rethinking Chartism” and “Why is the Labour Party in a mess?” Jones takes this approach most decisively. In the former, he seeks to articulate the ways in which class-consciousness arose out of political discourses (and not the other way around) within the Chartist movement in the early 19th century. Jones looks closely at the language of the Chartists movement, “what Chartists actually said or wrote, the terms in which they addressed each other or their opponents” (94), in his attempt to argue this position. Throughout, he wants to emphasize that “social” conditions had their effect, that “... the matter determines the possibility of the form,” but “the form [too] conditions the development of the matter” (95). Jones argues that the national character of the Chartist movement, its emphasis on universal suffrage, among other characteristics, cannot be adequately explained by a look at social conditions. He looks, for example, at the influence of the language of early 19th-century radicalism in formulating ideas of “oppression” as well as the broad “popular vocabulary of class” (111). And he investigates the ways in which the ideas projected by subsequent movements (e.g., trade unionism, Owenism, “Ricardian socialism”) heavily employed, but also changed radical conceptions to fit their own interests.

In the latter chapter, he looks into discursive uses of “the Labour Party,” which he wants to suggest is a “vacant center,” a sort of receptacle for different, often quite conflicting, political agendas. In this vein, he sees the “history” of the Party, sometimes termed “the labour movement” in England, not as a cohesive evolution, but as “an animating myth,” with often quite palpable impact. From this perspective, he argues that

the late 20th century demise of the Party, while importantly influenced by changes in work and lifestyle structures, is primarily due to discursive shifts in allegiance that effectively alienated both (broadly conceived) “middle-“ and “working-class” interests.

In the 1940s, he argues, a significant working-class interest in organization, and a “professional middle-class” sense of philanthropic duty to “do the intellectual work” toward aiding the “common folk,” rallied the different camps around the idea of the trade union, and around the Labour Party as its primary political representative. Jones wants to argue that the fact that the Labour party has since (more or less) maintained this mythology in its “structure and constitution” has stifled any chance of incorporating the contemporary experiences and ideologies of the “real poor or oppressed” and of those more generally interested in a “socialist” platform (e.g., 256). That is, the political investments of these groups have shifted, while the Party’s mythological base and ideological platform have remained stagnant. For these broad reasons, Jones says, the Labour Party has lost its political hold in England.

In Jones’s account, then, “culture,” in the sense of expressed forms, takes on a force, a structuring capacity, not seen in Thompson. This model opens the notion of “class” up to radical diversification. By expanding the determinative landscape, Jones allows the possibility that class not only takes specific forms in specific contexts, but can be multiply “experienced” and so, have multiple “existences,” in any one setting, as his introductory remarks quoted above reflect. Because class experience does not grow purely out of the relationship to the means of production here, but is subject to simultaneous and successive discursive structuring, it can take varying forms.

Joan Wallach Scott (1999) offers a further extension. She critiques Jones's success in carrying out his theoretical goal, arguing that his focus on "vocabularies" or historically expressed forms, disallows a deeper examination of "how words acquire and construct meaning" (57). Only such an emphasis, she asserts, allows for discussion of the kinds of exclusions that are always relied upon in the making of secure meanings – exclusions like that of "femininity" from the notion of "the working-class." By expanding his "language" to a broader notion of meaning structures, she takes Jones's move one step further and incorporates a broader notion of a "determining" "culture." Expressed forms do not only structure class experience, the whole system of meaning upon which they are based does so as well. In this sense, "language" not only has the particularizing power to structure class experience, but also the restrictive power to exclude certain experiential possibilities, and so, subjectivities. Both of these moves are highly radical – giving "culture" not only the role of "expressing" class, but also of "structuring" it.

Paul Willis

Paul Willis's influential ethnographic school study, *Learning to Labor* (1977) sets out to examine the complex processes by which class structures get reproduced. Willis rejects the prevalent argument that this maintenance flows naturally from the differently distributed "talents" and "capacities" of differently positioned subjects. He wants to argue, instead, that 1) certain "structural" constraints (in the form of relationship to the means of production, as well as specific "ideologies" and practices taken up in the schools), and 2) unique "class cultural" formations, combine to recreate the larger

configuration – to confirm the pattern by which “working class kids” tend to “get working class jobs.” Importantly, Willis wants to show that this process is always one of *struggle*. The “working class culture” he describes is a process by which working class subjects feel, grapple with, and contest their subordinate position. The fact that that standing is, in the end, reconfirmed, is understood here as an ironic (and perhaps tragic) byproduct of this process:

I want to suggest that “failed” working class kids do not simply take up the falling curve of work where the least successful middle class, or the most successful working class kids, leave off. Instead of assuming a continuous shallowing line of ability in the occupational/class structure we must conceive of radical breaks represented by the interface of cultural forms. We shall be looking at the way in which the working class cultural pattern of “failure” is quite different and discontinuous from the other patterns. Though in a determined context it has its own processes, its own definitions, its own account of those other groups conventionally registered as more successful. And this class culture is not a neutral pattern, a *mental* category, a set of variables impinging on the school from the outside. It comprises experiences, relationships, and ensembles of systematic types of relationship which not only set particular “choices” and “decisions” at particular times, but also structure, really and experientially, how these “choices” come about and are defined in the first place. (1)

There are several “cultural” layers in Willis’s model. His primary ethnographic focus is on describing a “working class counter-school culture” among (chiefly) a group of “non-academic” “working class” boys in school together in an industrial town in central England he calls “Hammertown.” As noted, this “culture” is largely framed in terms of its “oppositional” ethos in Willis’s analysis. It is defined as a set of techniques, attitudes, meanings, practices, and traditions by which “the lads” articulate rejection of, or defiance against, a set of opposing figures: the school, its teachers, “the formal,” the “ear’oles” (their academically inclined peers), and so on. Willis identifies priorities that characterize the group, for example, “informality,” loyalty, and humor. He describes in

detail such configurations as “the laff,” a honed and essential “counter-school” skill, an important technique of solidarity, deflection and antagonism:

The “laff” is a multi-faceted implement of extraordinary importance in the counter-school culture...[T]he ability to produce it is one of the defining characteristics of being one of “the lads” – “We can make them laff, they [the ear’oles] can’t make us laff”. But it is also used in many other contexts: to defeat boredom and fear, to overcome hardship and problems – as a way out of almost anything. In many respects the “laff” is the privileged instrument of the informal... (29)

And he suggests “rules” and “taboos” by which “the lads” abide – against “informing” on one another, for example: “Informing contravenes the essence of the informal group’s nature: the maintenance of oppositional meanings against the penetration of ‘the rule’” (24). This is very much a cohesive “cultural” unit in Willis’s configuration.

Willis also puts forth a broad notion of “working class culture,” which he is interested in identifying in its own right. As he asserts in his introduction, a major aim of the book is: “...to examine important and central aspects of working class culture through the concrete study of one of its most revealing manifestations” (1977, 1-2). He sees the lads’ “counter school culture” as a kind of variation on this larger “class culture,” to which “its points of contact...are not accidental” and from which “its style [is not] quite independent, or its cultural skills unique or special” (52). In the interest of specifying these commonalities, he gives an extended account of the work culture for which his boys are destined, what he calls “shopfloor culture,” for which he gives a number of distinguishing features. For example, he suggests that this wider culture is characterized by a disdain for “theoretical knowledge” and “qualifications” which he sees as the larger configuration from which the lads’ dismissal of school draws. He writes:

The rejection of school work by ‘the lads’ and the omnipresent feeling that they know better is ... paralleled by a massive feeling on the shopfloor, and in the working class generally, that practice is more important than theory. As a big

handwritten sign, borrowed from the back of a matchbox and put up by one of the workers, announces on one shopfloor: ‘An ounce of keenness is worth a whole library of certificates’. (56)

Willis is careful to say that he does not propose the existence of an unchanging, uniform formation that crops up “inevitably” wherever labor power is alienated. He emphasizes that, instead, this notion is meant to capture certain “shared themes” that arise out of common “location.” By being members of the “same level of a class society,” working class subjects have exposure to “similar basic structural properties,” “similar problems,” and “similar ideological constructions” (59). And they experience historical *contacts* with other similarly situated subjects that tend to maintain those themes:

...[T]he class culture is supported by massive webs of informal groupings and countless overlappings of experience, so that central themes and ideas can develop and be influential in practical situations where their direct logic may not be the most appropriate...As these themes are taken up and recreated in concrete settings, they are reproduced and strengthened and made further available as resources for others in similar structural situations. (59)

It is in this sense that he says that in the “counter-school culture”: “...working class themes are mediated to individuals and groups in their own determinate context and where working class kids creatively develop, transform and finally reproduce aspects of the larger culture in their own praxis...” (2).

After describing the “cultural” landscape in this way, Willis proceeds to suggest a theoretical framework for thinking through how the “lads” can be seen to “resist” their subordination while at the same time effectively reproducing it. Here, he proposes ideas of “penetration,” “limitation,” and “partial penetration” to capture a kind of circumscribed “agency” on the part of working class-cultural actors:

“Penetration” is meant to designate impulses within a cultural form towards the penetration of the conditions of existence of its members and their position within the social whole but in a way which is not centered, essentialist or individualist. “Limitation” is meant to designate those blocks, diversions and ideological effects which confuse and impede the full development and expression of these impulses. The rather clumsy but strictly accurate term, “partial penetration” is meant to designate the interaction of these two terms in a concrete culture. (119)

He argues that the “counter-school culture” he describes exemplifies this idea of “partial penetration.” The lads in some sense collectively recognize their subordination, and in specific, contextually meaningful ways, they resist it. But the expression of that resistance is so “bound” by the “internal and external limitations” posed by, essentially, the “needs” of capital – its material demands and, more directly, its attendant values and meanings – that it recreates their position, even while articulating “freedom” on its own terms (120). It is by this process that their “damnation is experienced, paradoxically, as true learning, affirmation, appropriation, and as a form of resistance” (3).

In his configuration of “limitation,” Willis clearly espouses some version of “dominant” or “hegemonic” meanings of “culture” – ideas he talks about in terms of the “symbolic power of structural determination” (171), and the “unconscious” endorsement and “naturalization” of the “larger structure” (146). In his delineation of the concept, Willis focuses on two “divisions” that he sees as particularly influential in the ultimate failure of this “working class culture” to impact the positioning of its actors. What might be called “hegemonic” notions of a distinction between “mental” and “manual” labor, and an overlying feminization and masculinization of these realms, respectively, are posed as surviving whatever surface-level contestation may occur. Aspects of the mental/manual labor division are picked up in school ideologies, and are resisted in their specific form there by the lads, but that resistance ultimately re-inscribes their

fundamentality: the lads define themselves, defiantly, on the side of “manual” labor, largely out of an investment in patriarchy. A fully egalitarian goal, by which the lads would begin to truly emancipate themselves, is thwarted by such processes according to Willis.

What is particularly useful about Willis’s configuration is that he presents the relationship between “culture” and “class” as a deeply complex and *multilayered* process of struggle over meaning. By fully picking up Marx’s discussion of ideology and alienation, Willis is able to capture the ways in which class is not only specifically meaningful to particular social actors, in particular places, but that those configurations are made in relation to an immediately opposing set of meanings, as well as a set of underlying, naturalized meanings that both sides tend to unknowingly adopt. Willis, that is, gives us a model that incorporates a *hegemonic* sense of culture, a *dominant ideological* one, as well as a kind of “authentic” local one.

It is possible to criticize Willis, in line with recent anthropological critiques of the “culture” concept, for proposing a kind of “bounded,” “uniform” group in this last configuration. By posing this cohesive, “resistant,” “counter-school” culture Willis might be said to be using a certain move that Sherry Ortner describes as “ethnicizing,” where the “classic anthropological desire to see the culture[] of [a] community[] as having a certain authenticity in [its] own terms” (1991, 167) is evident. This tendency, which can be argued to be a continuation of the Boasian tradition, can be clearly seen here. But by framing this “culture” in terms of its relationship with other layered systems of meaning, and quite importantly, with the larger forces of power that inflect them, Willis satisfies many of the critiques in this vein as well. That is, by posing a context of

interacting cultures, he emphasizes notions of process, multiplicity, and partiality that have been increasingly articulated as important (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1999, Clifford 1986, 1988, 1997, Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

Class and The Subject:

If one wants to grant to Marxist thought its full complexity, one would have to say that man in a period of exploitation is *at once both* the product of his own product and a historical agent who can under no circumstances be taken as a product. This contradiction is not fixed; it must be grasped in the very movement of *praxis*.

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*

As in the problem of “culture,” class theory has long had a complex relationship to notions of “determination” and “agency,” “structure” and “subject.” Marx makes this problem central in the theory of alienation, and in the notion “ideology,” (where agency is broadly conceived as masked under capitalism), as well as in his notion of “consciousness” and, of course, revolutionary action (where it is generally understood as recaptured). And certainly, much of the subsequent discussion of his work has been explicitly focused on this problem. In a sense, the broad effort outlined above might be understood in general terms as part of an attempt to bring the “subjective” more completely into class theory: If we can see class as meaningful, lived, or enacted, we might find room for escape, evasion, interruption, or argument; conversation, rephrasing, or intentional complicity, in relation to the determining force of capital. Indeed, the accounts outlined above can be argued to provide just this kind of “space.” As mentioned, Thompson moves class into the realm of acting subjects by placing experience and consciousness at the center of his model. Indeed, he writes that his work

is: "...a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning" (9). The broader tendencies to emphasize "expressive culture" and "experience" could clearly also be conceived as allowing room for the subjective. Particularly if we consider notions like Sherry Ortner's "agencies of intentions" (2001, 2006) and James Scott's "hidden transcripts" (1990), the anxieties and longings, resentments and pain described in these accounts can be taken as important inclusions of the agentive. The argument for "class cultures," too, might be seen in this light in several respects. By asserting the existence of these unique priorities, practices, meanings and ideas, authors in this genre are clearly invested in a kind of creative capability on the part of their interlocutors, especially in the face of immediately opposing ideologies. As we saw in Willis, even if these actors are ultimately reproducing their positions, and maintaining certain hegemonic configurations in the process, they are doing so on their own terms.

I would like to now turn to a set of works that address the question of class and subjectivity in more extended, and explicit terms – a set of texts that theorize class through "practice" and/or "performance." These models, I find, not only offer important further insight into the complexity of the class-making process, but they are uniquely able to make conceptual space for *movement* where class is concerned. This is an element of utmost importance to understanding class, fully, as "made," as it focuses our attention in the most explicit terms on social actors' maneuverability in relation to class. First delineating Pierre Bourdieu's model for "class practice" (through his larger theory of habitus) and Sherry Ortner's notion of "class projects," giving particular attention to the manner in which "movement" or "mobility" are incorporated into each, I go on to look at Julie Bettie's formulation of "class performance." Bettie's model, I argue, allows for the

conceptualization of a unique version of “class mobility,” one that captures a sense of movement and instability that has been quite fully theorized with regard to other domains of difference (most notably, gender and race/ethnicity), but has seen a slow uptake in the theorization of class. Each of these aspects will be key to my use of “class” in relation to the Brooklyn Country scene.

Bourdieu – Class *Practice*, Social Trajectory:

Bourdieu’s model for all human practice is based on his notion of *habitus*, the “structured, structuring structures,” or, the “conditioned,” and “conditioning” “dispositions” that direct subjects’ interactions with and movements in the world (1984, 171). A subject’s habitus, Bourdieu argues, is made up of internalized “schemes of perception, thought and action” that provide a kind of “logic” for her engagements, a system of meanings, values, and techniques (1980, 53-4). The habitus, he says, is “structured” by the circumstances, experiences and lessons of a subject’s development, and it in turn acts to “structure” that subject’s worldly practice. It follows, in Bourdieu’s model, that subjects developing under similar conditions and conditionings form similar habitus, and that these similar habitus engender “homologous” practices. Objective social groupings, he argues, are felt, and made manifest, by these practical similarities.

Bourdieu’s notion of “social class,” described most extensively in *Distinction* (1984), seeks to capture one central domain in which such groupings are reflected, and formed, in modern capitalist societies. For Bourdieu, “class” depends, for its very existence in social and cultural life, on the formation and operations of various “class habitus”:

Social class is not defined by a property (not even the most determinant one, such as the volume and composition of capital) nor by a collection of properties..., nor even by a chain of properties strung out from a fundamental property (position in the relations of production) in a relation of cause and effect, conditioner and conditioned; *but by the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effects they exert on practices.* (106; emphasis added)

This “structure,” according to Bourdieu, is what makes class meaningful in any given context; it makes class an intelligible category for practicing subjects. Like the notion of habitus more generally, “class habitus” is theorized as “structured” by specific social conditions and conditionings, differentiable *here* in terms of “asset” structures (volumes and compositions of economic and cultural capital), and by “trajectory” (change in those structures over time). Also like the larger concept, class habitus is theorized as promoting logically coherent practices within each individual subject, and “homologous,” group-making practices among similarly situated subjects. This aspect is, indeed, the focus of his extended (1984) study.

Bourdieu is largely interested in the “reproduction” of class positioning. But he introduces subjective and historical involvements, that is to say, openings (if, as we shall see, *only* openings) for movement and/or change, in two primary ways. First, in emphasizing the habitus as the “generative principle” (1984, 170), Bourdieu counters a more simply “materialist” notion of reproduction. Although he suggests a high degree of similarity between positions of origin and positions articulated in practice, he does not suggest a simple, that is to say a *passive* remaking of class positioning. In proposing the model of “practice,” as such, Bourdieu is explicitly emphasizing the point of mediation, theorized in the notion of *habitus*, between human conditions and human action. In *The Logic of Practice*, for example, he writes: “The theory of practice as practice insists,

contrary to positivist materialism, that the objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and, contrary to intellectualist idealism, that the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the *habitus*...” (1980, 52). Practice, in Bourdieu’s model, is thus neither the disengaged reproduction of social position, nor is it “free play,” unencumbered by that position; it is subjectively felt and enacted movement that must always simultaneously be seen as heavily constrained by the set of possibilities to which a subject has been exposed. It is in this sense that Bourdieu speaks of practice as “regulated improvisation[.]” (Ibid., 57). I should be careful to note here that, while Bourdieu importantly opens this subjective realm as a key site of attention for class theory, he gives it relatively little analytical or ethnographic attention in his own text. As I will demonstrate, this is one key point at which both Ortner and Bettie pick up and extend Bourdieu’s model.

The second way in which Bourdieu incorporates the potential for movement is in his notion of “social trajectory.” Situated subjects are always most likely to follow a specific set of paths, which Bourdieu calls the “modal trajectory”: “To a given volume of inherited capital there corresponds a band of more or less equally probable trajectories leading to more or less equivalent positions (this is the field of possibilities objectively offered to a given agent)...” (1984, 110). Importantly, though, this “modal trajectory” is always only a probability for Bourdieu, however strong. In certain instances, he says, changes in trajectory do occur. Such moves, he suggests, are typically due to critical on-the-ground interventions that are part of the “social trajectory,” be it “individual” or “collective” in its application: “...the shift from one trajectory to another often depends on collective events – wars, crises etc. – or individual events – encounters, affairs,

benefactors etc....” (Ibid., 110). Even in these cases, however, the habitus remains a structuring factor. On the one hand, he argues that such events are typically contingent upon and/or directed by a specific location and habitus; as he writes, they “themselves depend statistically on the position and disposition of those whom they befall” (110). And on the other hand, Bourdieu contends that even in cases of apparent breaks in the “modal trajectory” the *habitus* persists significantly unchanged (109). Here, he uses the example of “parvenus” and “déclassés,” who tend to always betray the disparity between their “original” and current positions due to the fact that “the practices generated by the habitus appear as ill-adapted because attuned to an earlier state of the objective conditions” (109).

Thus, Bourdieu is clearly most interested in theorizing the constancy produced by the habitus. Though he undoubtedly accounts for the possibility of movement in his incorporation of this notion of “social trajectory,” he, again, does not substantially theorize or ethnographically attend to that aspect. He is primarily interested in the reproductive power of class habitus, and gives relatively little attention to these moments of movement. As I will show, this is another key point of departure for both Ortner and Bettie.

Ortner – Class *Projects*:

Sherry Ortner’s model for class practice draws significantly from Bourdieu’s configuration. She is clearly invested in the kind of deep subjective embeddedness that Bourdieu’s theory emphasizes. She presents class subjects as always strongly structured by their social positions, whether in their “internal” or “external” lives:

...I treat class as something like what Bourdieu (1978, 1990) has called a 'habitus,' an external world of cultural assumptions and social institutions that ordinary people inhabit without thinking very much about them, and an internalized version of that world that becomes part of people's identities, generating dispositions to feel/think/judge/act in certain ways... (2003, 12)

Also like Bourdieu, Ortner looks to the subject and to historical trajectory for the possibility of movement. But Ortner's model inserts greater "mobility" or maneuverability in two major ways. First, she emphasizes subjective anxieties and longings attached to class as a constitutive part of both the concept, and the materiality of class in the world. That is, unlike Bourdieu, who tends to treat his subjects largely as the enactors of "logics" (even if essential to that en-action), Ortner frames the subjective aspect of class in terms of experience, sincere feeling, invested, often *purposeful*, interaction:

If class is always an object of desire (or repulsion), whether historically or in the present, then it seems more useful to think of people, groups, policy makers, and so on, as engaged in "class projects" rather than, or in addition to, being occupants of particular classes-as-locations... We may think of class as something people are or have or possess, or as a place in which people find themselves or are assigned, but we may also think of it as a project, as something that is always being made or kept or defended, feared or desired. (2003, 13-14)

And she wants to configure such subjective work as *acting back* on the more "material" or "structural" factors: "...I assume a two-way relationship, fully active in both directions, between actors' perceptions/imaginings and objective locations" (13). By conceptualizing class practices as *projects*, that is, Ortner is able to more fully incorporate the importance and relevance of a notion of *agency* into her model – a notion in keeping with her earlier argument, mentioned above, that "agency" should not be understood exclusively in terms of "domination" or "resistance," but must be identified, too, in the domain of "desires or intentions," in the realm of "culturally constituted

projects...that infuse life with meaning and purpose” (2001, 80). This configuration offers a unique model for movement, a subjective ability to stray from one’s position where class is concerned:

...I depart from Bourdieu and others in emphasizing the degree to which the imagination, at both the level of individual and the level of public culture, can always exceed the limits of any given position...[E]ven staying within the system one can always, as the saying goes, dream...” (2003, 13)

And indeed, movement is central to Ortner’s project; she is explicitly focused on the upward mobility enacted by the majority of her Class of ’58 interlocutors.

But it is essential to emphasize here that at no point does Ortner suggest that such movement is either “free” or “unassisted.” That is, not only are her subjects always understood as heavily restricted by the resources (cultural or economic capital) that have been made available to them, but when “movements” do occur in her model, they are always configured as, at least in some part, *historically contingent*. That is, Ortner writes against a notion of mobility entirely bound up in ideas of individualism (e.g., “bootstrapping”), arguing instead that external interventions into social experience tend to play a huge role here. This, too, is in keeping with her earlier formulations of the notion of agency (e.g., 1996). In emphasizing and theoretically engaging what Bourdieu would call the “social trajectory” in this way, Ortner again takes further here a notion only suggested in his theory. This, I would argue, represents the second major tool by which Ortner inserts greater possibility of movement into her model. Ortner is primarily interested in the role played by large-scale social movements here, particularly articulating the ways in which members of the Class of ’58 “capitalized” on widespread struggle against anti-Semitism, and on the feminist and civil rights movements. But she does account, usually more briefly, for smaller-scale “interventions” in this vein. She

discusses, for example, the impacts of “family disruption” (e.g., pp. 33-41). Or, at greater length later in the text, she discusses the role played by school “tracking.” Importantly, as noted, Ortner never proposes that these “interventions” act alone. Intersection with available capital and subjective investment always direct and alter the impact of these events.

Ortner makes clear openings for the notion that movement beyond one’s class “origins” is possible (indeed, reading her account, we see that it is nearly inevitable across generations). Given the scope of her book, and the “retrospective” character of her ethnographic engagement, Ortner’s interest is primarily in a long-term kind of movement. There are instances where she discusses more intimate, short-lived crossings; for example, in her sixth chapter, she discusses the short-range practices by which students would stray from their (heavily classed) social locations in the school system (e.g., “tame” students engaging in “wild” practice). But Ortner’s primary interest is in the more secure shifts she finds in the long-range; she is interested in identifying the broad sweeps that characterize the Class of ‘58. She is careful to acknowledge, however, that the more intimate practices can “contain the seeds of changes” (134) of a broader type. In this sense, I would argue that Ortner theorizes the openings in Bourdieu’s model at the level of extended notions of mobility. Whereas Julie Bettie’s model, as we shall see, theorizes these openings more in terms of short-term notions of movement. I see both types as crucial to the understanding of how class is “subjectively” engaged, and how “mobility” works.

Bettie – Class *Performativity*, Class *Performance*:

Like Bourdieu and Ortner, Julie Bettie (2000, 2003) wants to emphasize the persistent importance of class's "materiality," which she says "includes both economic and cultural resources..." while also focusing on class practice in the interest of promoting a concept of class that moves *beyond* "material location" (2000, 10). Bettie sees class as a "lived culture and a subjective identity" (2000, 7), and as "something that is accomplished" (2000, 10). Thus, also like Bourdieu and Ortner, Bettie wants to emphasize that class must always be enacted, put into the world and into meaning, or in her terminology, *performed*, by subjects. And particularly like Ortner, Bettie wants to extend the possibilities of such a subjectively-engaged model. In this vein, she suggests two ways in which the terminology of "performing" is useful in theorizing class. She proposes the term "performative" to capture the sense of subjective enactment held in common with both Bourdieu and Ortner. And she suggests a notion of "performance" to describe a slightly different concept, one that allows even more subjective involvement, and a unique notion of the possibility of movement:

...[W]hat is necessary to understand about my use of and distinction between the terms *performance* and *performative* is that the former refers to agency and a conscious attempt at passing. Applied to class this might mean consciously imitating middle-class expressions of cultural capital in an attempt at mobility. *Performativity*, on the other hand, refers to the fact that class subjects are the effects of the social structure of class inequality, caught in unconscious displays of cultural capital that are a consequence of class origin or habitus... The dual concepts of performance and performativity thus allow me analytical room to explain the extent to which class identity is both fluid and fixed. (2003, 52)

This bifurcated model, that is, allows Bettie to continue to emphasize the restrictions posed by class conditions, and something like the staying-power of class habitus, while at the same time giving attention to the constant subjective involvement in class-making, as

well as the looseness and multiplicity with which class is negotiated on a day-to-day basis. Class “performances,” or instances of “passing,” though certainly not *disengaged* from the constraints of position, reveal the everyday makings, and, indeed, the everyday *travel* in class position:

While there is a strong correlation between a girl’s class of “origin” (by which I mean her parents’ socioeconomic status) and her class performance at school (which includes academic achievement, prep or nonprep activities, and membership in friendship groups and their corresponding style), it is an imperfect one, and there are exceptions in which middle-class girls perform working-class identity and vice versa. In other words, some students were engaged in class “passing” as they chose to perform class identities that were not their “own” (2000, 9).

Indeed, Bettie finds these disparities common enough that she identifies all of her interlocutors in terms of both their class “origin” and their class “performance” in the school setting: “I came to define students not only as working or middle class in origin but also as working- or middle-class *performers*...” (2000, 9).

Bettie relies on a relatively overt, self-conscious notion of “agency” here, and an expansion in this regard might prove importantly complicating (e.g., What might be gained by identifying as “agencies” the struggles, anxieties, investments and projects that simultaneously lie in the “performance” of one’s class of “origin”?). Nonetheless, her formulation of class “performance” offers fascinating theoretical space for short-term, partial, and ambivalent maneuvering in the making of class – where inclusion and distance, alliance and disdain might intricately interplay. This model also has important implications for the ways in which other kinds of difference structures can be complexly interwoven in the everyday workings of class. One particularly compelling example Bettie offers in this regard is that of “middle-class chola performance” (2003, 86). Here, a group of mostly third-generation Mexican-American girls from “middle class” families

choose to adopt a “working class” (and Mexican-American, feminine) identity. Out of their own discomfort in occupying a position seen as contradictory in the hegemonic logic of this social system, that is, in being Mexican-American and *not* working class, Bettie argues, these girls chose to perform the class “other.” What is particularly interesting here is that, even though Bettie reports that these girls eventually “accepted the cultural capital their parents had to give them,” and returned in significant ways to a middle-class trajectory, they maintained their “performances,” and perhaps more relevantly, their alliance in equally significant ways (21). As she writes:

Although...Ana, Rosa and Patricia [had moved back “up”]..., they were still friends with las chicas and still dressed and performed the kind of race-class femininity that las chicas did. In this way they distanced themselves from preps and countered potential accusations of acting white. In short, their style confounded the race-class equation and was an intentional strategy. By design, they had middle-class aspirations without assimilation to prep, which for them meant white, style. (2003, 87-8)

This kind of multiplicity where class is concerned is a crucial site for the investigation of class “making.”

Like Bourdieu and Ortner, Bettie suggests that such movements are motivated and shaped by social “interventions.” But in her model, these tend to take shape, unsurprisingly, in personal relationships and exchanges. For example, she describes the upward “performances” of sets of working-class Mexican-American and white girls who often wanted to either distinguish themselves from “delinquent brothers” or to emulate (and often surpass) the class-aspiring progress of older sisters (2003, 151). Importantly, these interpersonal “interventions,” these relationships and exchanges, are always, for Bettie, informed, indeed often constrained, by the operations of and negotiations with larger structures of power – those that relate to class, but also to gender, race/ethnicity,

and sexuality, among others. She is careful to note (but is perhaps a bit late in doing so), for example, that the kinds of “performances” seen among girls like Ana, Rosa and Patricia take place with much greater “ease” among subjects who are already situated in relative freedom:

...[O]f course, class-passing down is far different than class-passing up...[I]t is one thing to “perform” working-class identity if you have middle-class cultural capital and quite another to be working class and trying to acquire the cultural capital that even allows you to pass as middle-class. These are not parallel experiences. (165)

It is also important to note here that Bettie does not suggest that such practices take place in isolation from larger social movements, historical shifts, institutional changes, and so on. Indeed, such forces play a key role in her larger discussion. But in explaining these intimate instances of crossing, the interpersonal is typically the immediately motivating factor. In this sense, I would argue that Bettie pursues a notion of “social trajectory,” much like Ortner, but by looking on a much more mundane level for that movement, she offers an important alternate perspective.

Bettie’s model provides a key intervention into understanding the ways in which class operates. In her notion of “performance,” or “passing” she theorizes a type of “mobility” that, as noted, has been by now quite substantially incorporated into social and cultural theory on race/ethnicity and gender, but has seen a slow uptake in the scholarship on class. Additionally, Bettie finds that these “performances” sometimes had a significant impact on the larger class “trajectory” of these student’s high school careers, and lives: “One the one hand, embracing and publicly performing a particular class culture mattered more than origins in terms of a student’s aspiration, her treatment by teachers and other students, and her class future” (9). This further suggests the

importance of giving sustained theoretical and ethnographic attention to such everyday subjective movements, as they are not only relevant to theorizing the “ordinary” experience of class, but to the larger movements that are more often researched.

My Use of the Category

While I understand “class” throughout this text as inherently structured by the unequal material and social circumstances into which individual subjects are born and live, I borrow from each of the approaches outlined above in order to theorize it as something that operates and exists far beyond that basic emplacement. On the one hand, I am obviously investigating a set of expressive forms, meanings and practices, and through and around them, a set of feelings or experiences here. In this sense, like several of the works outlined above, I am looking for class *in* something like “culture” throughout the text. And this focus is in many ways driven by something else that I draw from the theories outlined above: an attempt to frame the category as not only something that requires subjective mediation, or *practice* to come into any objective existence it may have, but as something that individual subjects are usually actively engaged in *making* in some way – whether that means struggling with, fearing, justifying, hiding, desiring, or becoming through short or long-term, symbolic, or material projects. In this regard I am particularly interested in attending to the subtle *movements* in class – along the lines of Bettie’s notion of class “performances” – that can take place in everyday practice through these subjective engagements. Indeed, I want to suggest that the Brooklyn country scene was characterized by a kind of constant movement in class positioning – a notion I am

trying to theorize here under the concept of “alternativity” – wherein alignment with and distance from both sides of the class spectrum were constantly being articulated.

Throughout the text I also draw from the works outlined above in my attempt to understand the ways in which the experience, meaning and negotiation of “class” always happens within a complex context where, on the one hand, other categories, “languages,” meanings, structures, and so on, always intersect with those related to class, and, on the other, there are typically dominant and/or hegemonic versions of class categories/meanings to contend with as well (more on this in the next section). In this sense, I try to be continuously attentive to the ways in which class operates, roughly speaking, “within” or “through” culture(s), and is in many ways shaped or restricted by it.

Finally, in linking this scene to other “alternative” discourses and practices (and to the larger social and economic context in which all of these examples arise) I am also interested overall in framing it as part of something like a broader “middle class culture.” That is, I am interested in articulating the ways in which its priorities, values, tastes, techniques, and so on, show congruencies with a broader range of middle-class discourses and practices, to which, as Willis says above, “its points of contact...are not accidental,” and from which “its style [is not] quite independent, or its cultural skills unique.”

The American Middle Class

The Hegemonic Middle

Searching for the American middle class is a little like looking for air. It is everywhere, invisible, and taken for granted.

– Loren Baritz, *The Good Life: The Meaning*

of Success for the American Middle Class

Middle-class-ness is said to characterize the United States. Taking form in such figures as “The American Middle Class,” “the middle class family,” and “middle class America,” the category is a powerful figure of ordinariness, respectability, and belonging to a kind of national project. Ubiquitous in American public cultural forms, it is a key symbol of “unmarked” American subjectivity (e.g., DeMott 1990). And indeed, it has been quite widely noted that the vast majority of American subjects actually *use* this title when asked to identify their class position, regardless of simultaneously acknowledged differences in economic and cultural capital (e.g., Baritz 1982, Dudley 1994, A. Fox 2004a, Halle 1984, Ortner 1998a). Looked at from another perspective, the United States is configured in each instance as a “*classless* society,” where “affluence” is widely distributed, and division is negligible.

The prioritization of mobility, and esteem for “middle” standing has had a long history in the United States. The notion ties into long-standing mythologies about the value “individualism” and “industriousness.” It bears continuity with a wider range of discourses about citizenship and the self, discipline and entrepreneurialism (e.g., Baritz 1982, Bledstein and Johnston 2001). Loren Baritz suggests, for example, that important aspects of America’s high regard for its middle class originated in the ideologies of its colonists: Puritans and “pioneers.” Each of these groups, he says, prioritized individualism and self-discipline, with slightly different aims.

The future American middle class grew from the twin roots of the Puritans’ unendurable moral system and the pioneers’ difficult success. The Puritans tirelessly taught that worldly success might be a hint of God’s mysterious favor. The pioneers daily lived amidst such practical favor. The Puritans and their successors advocated the moral discipline necessary to gain wealth; the rigors of

their lives taught the pioneers the same lessons. In America, work, diligence, perseverance, sobriety and thrift paid off. (Baritz 1982, 5)

The social and economic shifts that followed the Second World War, however, gave the notion of middle-class-ness a particular shape and an expanded force in the United States. The characteristics of the “post war boom” have been widely noted. The loans and allowances offered to veterans in the GI Bill mixed with an expanded job market and a rise in corporate profits to allow for a large-scale increase in income and consumption levels (e.g., Baritz 1982, Ortner 2003). A broad rise in the need for managerial, professional and technical labor and a huge increase in the level of college attendance combined to create what was thought to be a “new class” of laborers (e.g., Brodtkin 1994 and 1998). And a state-led ideological effort was initiated under the “Communist threat” to quell the economic conflicts that had flared during the Depression. Sherry Ortner (2003) notes, for example, that a fear of the vulnerability of an “uneducated ‘mass’” to ideological manipulation provided impetus for expanded access to skills training and higher education (28). It has also been well documented that a surge in “optimism” accompanied this increased prosperity, especially as viewed in light of the Depression’s defeat: the United States had “arrived,” it was widely believed, and could conquer any setback. As Loren Baritz writes:

Postwar America prospered as never before, and the middle class was euphoric. Not only were high-paying jobs plentiful but millions of people suddenly expected to rise in social status. It was thrilling to know, absolutely know, that the next move would be to a private house, from the city to the green suburbs, that the new job would not only pay the bills but bring respect, and that the growing number of children would get the sort of education that would propel them into even more affluence. (183)

Of course, such prosperity and optimism was not truly available to all, but under the influence of these shifts, a hugely prevalent *discourse* of achieved and unending “affluence” emerged in political, academic and public cultural discourse (Baritz 1982, DeMott 1990, Ortner 2003, Parker 1972). Framed in terms of the triumph of democratic capitalism and American diligence, the postwar boom was treated as a proud vision of the nation’s future – exceptional, secure and egalitarian. Parker writes:

After World War II it became popular to describe America as the Affluent Society and to believe that the unprecedented level of material abundance enjoyed by the middle class had made many traditional problems irrelevant. Poverty was declared an afterthought, and politics was said to be facing an “end of ideology.” Gains in education and technology and the growth of a new class of managers and professionals were supposed to be the first steps toward an automated society where leisure, not work, would be a burden. (Parker 1972, ix)

And this configuration has been quite persistent. As Parker goes on to say, it was strongly maintained in the face of vast inequalities in wealth and access, racial and gender discrimination, as well as brewing upheaval present in the “Age of Affluence.” And he suggests that even as these issues exploded into widespread critique and social upheaval the 1960s and early 70s, the notion of a “universal,” “stable” middle class proved remarkably resilient. Looking at a set of critical social scientific discourses arising in this era, he writes:

...[S]urprisingly this new tone of doubt does not represent a rejection or even a serious modification of the earlier hopeful vision of a homogeneously affluent America; instead it represents an amendment or deferment of the vision. The Vietnam War is viewed as an accidental involvement, unconnected to the structure of America...Even poverty...is incorporated into the affluence consciousness by its popular acceptance as a crisis of racial minorities. Only racial discrimination excludes them from the general prosperity. (5)

The frequency with which contemporary Americans in a wide range of positionalities identify themselves as “middle class” particularly registers the pervasiveness of the category. Kathryn Dudley’s displaced Kenosha auto workers (1994), Aaron Fox’s rural (he says “working class”) Texans (2004a), Sherry Ortner’s widely divergent Weequahic classmates (2003), Katherine Newman’s managers and executives (1999), all call themselves “middle class.” And the regularity with which the term continues to come up in political and public cultural discourses to denote the “ordinary” or the “essential” is telling. But perhaps the most convincing evidence of the continued resonance of this notion is the extreme *absence* of explicit class discourse in the United States, the ways in which it is talked around, and spoken through other categories and negotiations. I would argue that, though there are other factors in play (Ortner 1991 suggests this might be an “overdetermined” state of affairs), this postwar vision has been greatly influential in making class a kind of inconceivable or unspeakable difference category in the United States (Ortner 2003). Either going unseen or explicitly avoided, it tends to “hide” in other concepts and struggles. It has been widely noted, for example, that racial/ethnicity categories in the United States often so tightly carry a class referent that variations thereof create moments of conceptual crisis. Middle- or upper-class blackness, and lower-class whiteness, for example, are often experienced as highly problematic phenomena, from a range of subject positions, provoking a high level of anxiety and a large amount of cultural “work” at their explanation, justification or resolution (e.g., Bell 1983, Mahon 2004, Hardigan 1999, Wray and Newitz 1997). Sherry Ortner (1991), Aaron Fox (1996), and Kathleen Stewart (1993), in another vein, all discuss ways in which the masculine and the feminine often also carry heavy class

burdens. Particularly in a number of *working*-class discourses, these authors note that masculinity is often associated with (resistant and heroic) “lowness,” even “abjection,” and femininity is associated with (conforming and alienated) “aspiration” and “respectability.” Fox and Ortner both emphasize that this configuration often plays out in complex, and quite impassioned ways in male-female working-class relationships. Ortner additionally argues that middle-class parent-child relationships, and the frequency and character of struggle within them, are heavily imbued with class meaning. As I will discuss below, she suggests that due to the tenuous hold middle-class subjects have on their standing, because it must be actively reproduced by each successive generation, the “chronic friction and explosive potential in middle-class parent-child relations” reflects a larger class anxiety (1991, 176).

The dual notions of “hegemony” and “ideology,” broadly drawn out by Gramsci from Marx’s (and, in places, Engels’) configurations of power in the theories of alienation and ideology, respectively, are useful in theorizing this formation. In Gramsci’s (1992(1971)) definition, the “ideological” is meant to capture the domain of relatively explicit ideas and priorities that exert more or less direct influence, what Raymond Williams describes as “a relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs, of a kind that can be abstracted as a ‘worldview’ or a ‘class outlook’” (1977, 109). The “hegemonic,” on the other hand, is meant to describe a relatively *unspoken* and unseen set of ideas, values, modes of being, and a much more inhabiting or naturalized operation of power. In this domain, power is able work in more covert ways, passing that which serves it as unremarkable, the “natural” state of affairs. Raymond Williams, again, is useful here: “Hegemony maps the ‘relations of domination and

subordination' onto the whole of life in such a way that the needs and demands of that relationship, the limitations posed by it, appear as unremarkable, as 'common sense'" (Ibid., 110). Jean and John Comaroff (1991) emphasize the ways in which this leads to the erasure of alternatives, arguing that hegemony's "power has...often been seen to lie in what it silences, what it prevents people from thinking and saying, what it puts beyond the limits of the rational and the credible" (23). In this sense, we might say that the idea of a universal middle class operates in the United States as a largely hegemonic notion. Accepted as fact, it makes class unseen, or interpretable only through other categories (Fox 1996, Ortner 1998a, 1991, 2003, Stewart 1994). A naturalized state of affairs, it makes a discourse beyond middle-class-ness difficult (Dudley 1994, Fox 2004a, Ortner 1991, 2003). But of course the notion is explicitly employed, and supported in a number of ways as well – for example, in political discourse, as noted above, or in moments of subjective challenge to the idea. In this sense, we might say the notion tacks *between* the ideological and the hegemonic, emerging as explicit in places, submerging in others. This is indeed precisely the kind of fluidity the notion entails – as Jean and John Comaroff write: "...the hegemonic proportion of any dominant ideology may be greater or lesser. It will never be total..." (1991, 25).

The Anxious Middle

In addition to being the hegemonic class positioning in the United States, middle-class-ness has also been widely noted to be a particularly anxious location. This is in part precisely *because* of its hegemonic status: inclusion in the category is highly valued and desired (if often in an inexplicit way) on the one hand, but, because class tends to be so

unseen under this formation, it is almost impossible to define in broad and finite terms what the markers of that belonging might be. As Sherry Ortner writes, when it comes to defining the “middle class”: “there is almost no ‘there’ there” (1998b, 8). In one context, it may be determined by occupation or job responsibilities, in another by income or assets, and in still another by education, consumption patterns and lifestyle. Indeed, I would suggest that especially in looking at the everyday experience and negotiation of middle-class-ness, the terms become infinitely detailed, varied and contingent, shifting from one context- and even sometimes one moment to the next. And this creates a need for constant maneuvering at the level of meaning – symbolic work toward inclusion and exclusion. As I’ll discuss, this is part of what makes “alternativity” such a useful tool for negotiating middle-class standing – and such a common structure of feeling in experiencing it.

Additionally, as several theorists have argued, the primary form of capital held by members of the “middle class” is, broadly speaking, *cultural*: various kinds of knowledge, skills, and credentials earned. And this capital, unlike the more “material” kinds, cannot be saved or passed down. This too makes middle-class standing uncertain, and means that maintaining that standing requires a constant effort at shoring up these more “cultural” resources. In her book, *Fear of Falling*, Barbara Ehrenreich (1989) details this state of affairs with regard to the “professional middle class”:

...Its only “capital” is knowledge and skill, or at least the credentials imputing skill and knowledge. And unlike real capital, these cannot be hoarded against hard times, preserved beyond the lifetime of an individual, or, of course, bequeathed. The “capital” belonging to the middle class is far more evanescent than wealth, and must be renewed in each individual through fresh effort and commitment. In this class, no one escapes the requirements of self-discipline and self-directed labor; they are visited, in each generation, upon the young as they were upon the parents.

If this is an elite, then, it is an insecure and deeply anxious one. It is afraid, like any class below the most securely wealthy, of misfortunes that might lead to a downward slide. (15)

Sherry Ortner, too, suggests that: “At a practical level, there is always the question of whether middle-class children will successfully retain the class standing the parents have provided them” (1991, 176). And in this context, as Ehrenreich also points out, child rearing, education, and marriage choice, all become crucial loci of class reproduction/maintenance, and explicit long-term projects are fashioned to account for these factors. Ehrenreich, for example, calls professional education the “class fortress” of the middle class, a notion Burton Bledstein (1976) takes up in great detail. She also notes the massively expanded character of middle class parenting: “the province of scores of experts, psychologists, commentators, counselors, each feeding off of parental anxieties, offering new ‘solutions,’ raising new alarms” (83-4).

I would add to these arguments that the effort to build and maintain cultural capital is necessary for middle class subjects not only in order to ensure the reproduction one’s (or one’s family’s) standing over longer periods, but also to ensure the value of this capital in the day-to-day. That is, there is always the chance with cultural capital that the *terms* of value might shift, that new forms or new valuations will emerge, decreasing the value of what one “has” – particularly to the extent that this capital is enmeshed in consumer structures and processes that strongly prioritize newness and change. This means that middle class subjects are also motivated to engage in a relatively constant everyday maneuvering over those terms and values.

The Disappearing Middle

In light of some of the problems of “belonging” described above, it can be clearly argued that middle-class subjects are particularly inclined toward the *perception* of instability. But since the 1970s, there have also been a number of shifts in the larger social and economic climate in the United States that have had a strong impact on the *material* stability of “middle class” lives as well. The early 1970s saw a massive downturn in the economic growth that had marked the post-war era. A large-scale increase in international competition, and a decline in corporate profits, a dramatic rise in energy costs, and an eventual increase in inflation and unemployment, among other factors, set in motion a wide array of changes in the economic lives of Americans that have by and large persisted even when the economy has regained strength, and even “boomed” as it did in the 1990s.

On the one hand, the availability and structure of “middle class” work shifted dramatically through this period. In the now familiar process of “deindustrialization,” a large number of manufacturing companies in the Northeast and Midwest closed shop in the 1970s and -80s, moving south, west, and increasingly over time, out of the United States entirely in the purported effort to reduce costs and remain competitive. This meant a veritable evisceration of stable, well-paying jobs for a large portion of the population in these areas, jobs that were by and large never replaced, leading a large number of former manufacturing employees into lower-paying positions in the so-called “service industries.” A simultaneous rise in corporate downsizing and mergers meant a significant loss of jobs for “white-collar” employees as well. And perhaps even more influentially, many companies “restructured” their operations in this era, cutting costs in whatever

ways possible. Putting new emphasis on “flexibility” as a competitive strategy, they increasingly relied on “contingent” (temporary, freelance, or contract-based) and part-time labor, which resulted in a rise in under-employment, and, some argue, an increase in over-work in middle class jobs. Related to this, there was also a major movement toward diminishing or eliminating employer-supported health- and retirement benefits as part of this larger effort, which has shifted a large portion of these costs onto the individual, and left many to simply do without. Many have additionally argued that this “restructuring” also eliminated the expectation of the “job for life” and created an attendant lack of security, and a lack of loyalty from employers and employees alike. And, finally, new corporate hierarchies that were created as part of this shift newly limited upward mobility in certain categories of “white-collar” work.³³

The last three to four decades have also, of course, been marked by a large-scale shift in public policy, commonly described under the title of “neoliberalism,” which has had catastrophic impacts on the stability of the middle class in the United States (and indeed, the world). A large-scale shift away from the economic protections and “entitlements” instituted in the post-Depression and post-World War II eras is one key component of this. Prominently, the configuration and availability of government-funded “social welfare” programs, designed in large part to protect the highly valued “middle,” shifted in this period. Partial cuts to unemployment insurance, Social Security benefits and welfare, among other programs have meant that the “social safety net” that once

³³ For more on these various shifts, see, for example: Beck 2000; Fraser 2001; Harrison and Bluestone 1988, 2000; Kamenetz 2006; Lash and Urry 1987; Mooney 2008; Newman 1993 and 1999; Osterman, Kochan, Locke and Piore 2001; Sennett 1998; Vanneman and Canon 1987.

aimed to ensure sustained economic security for all Americans has been eroded. A broad policy movement toward both privatization and deregulation, purported to encourage “competition,” “innovation” and “efficiency,” to broad public benefits, has also characterized this period; and has been demonstrated to have instead created vast gains at the top end of the wealth spectrum, and a reduction in available benefits.³⁴ And a turn away from labor protections and organization, particularly taken up during the Reagan years, has meant that the capacity of Americans to advocate for their needs and rights in the workplace has been broadly diminished.³⁵

This range of transitions has contributed more generally to what has become an astronomical growth in income and wealth disparity since the 1970s, the most often-cited evidence of the “shrinking” or “disappearing” middle. Since early in that decade, Katherine Newman tells us, the “real weekly wages” of “the average American worker” began a steady move downward, and in the 1980s a broad-scale polarization in wealth began (1993, 40-41). By a range of accounts, wages in the middle and lower ends of the income spectrum have either remained stagnant or dropped steadily since the 1970s, when measured against inflation.³⁶ At the same time, there has, famously, been an explosion in executive compensation in this period.³⁷ Along with the popularity of tax

³⁴ See, e.g., Harvey 2005.

³⁵ For more on these developments, see, for example: Harrison and Bluestone 1988, 2000, Kamenetz 2006, Mooney 2008, Osterman et al 2001.

³⁶ See, e.g., Harrison and Bluestone 1988, 2000; Newman 1983; Uchitelle 1991.

³⁷ See, e.g., Dash 2005; Harvey 2005.

cuts for the wealthiest members of the population, these developments have taken the gaps in income and wealth to Depression-era proportions.³⁸

Finally, the dramatic rise in personal debt in this era has been widely noted as a major challenge to the material stability of “the middle class” in the United States. Nan Mooney writes: “The level of U.S. household debt has risen consistently over the course of the century, climbing from just 33.2 percent of disposable income in 1949 to 102.2 percent in 2000, and to 131.8 percent in 2005, making it the highest ever measured in our national history” (2008, 7). Credit card debt is most often cited in this regard. Robert D. Manning (2000) calls the rise in the use of consumer credit “one of the most profound social and cultural revolutions of the post-World War II era,” and argues that the reliance on it “both masks social status differences and exacerbates the widening chasm of U.S. postindustrial inequality” (2). In the 1980s, he says, credit card companies began to target middle-class Americans, newly experiencing economic instability due to “unexpected employment disruptions due to corporate downsizings and recession-related layoffs” (2000, 11). This strategy proved to be wildly successful, and was replicated in successive efforts to target other unstable populations. Between 1980 and 2000, he says, the average cardholder debt jumped from \$395 to \$6,648.³⁹ Educational debt has also been noted as a major component of the larger debt problem, particularly for the “middle class” (Draut 2005, Kamenetz 2006). The rising costs of higher education, combined with the decreasing availability of federal grant funds, and a federally mandated rise in

³⁸ See, e.g., Harvey 2005; Johnston 2007.

³⁹ Even worse, Manning notes that the average debt of “revolver households,” those who were carrying a balance each month (as opposed to “convenience households,” who were paying it off) was \$10,845 in the same year (12).

loan limits and availability in the early 1990s, have shifted a large portion of the financial burden onto the student in this era (Ibid.).⁴⁰ By a range of estimates, the average amount of educational debt incurred by those who borrow for a four-year degree is somewhere around twenty thousand dollars, as compared to a generation before, when federal grants abounded and borrowing was negligible by comparison (Kamenetz 2006, 285, 25-7).

Tamara Draut (2005) notes, for example, that in the years Baby Boomers were entering college, under the support of the Higher Education Act: “Borrowing one’s way through college just wasn’t the norm. In 1977, college students borrowed about \$6 billion (2002 dollars) to help pay for college, compared to \$28 billion borrowed by students in 1993. By 2003, the amount of borrowing had doubled, to \$56 billion” (33).⁴¹ Finally, a massive rise in mortgage debt has, of course, marked this era, becoming particularly dramatic in the last decade with the (eventually disastrous) rise in “sub-prime” lending. Americans have taken on larger and larger debt burdens in order to reach the quintessential “middle-class” goal of home ownership.

⁴⁰ Kamenetz notes that tuition rates have “been rising two or three times faster than inflation for three decades” (2006, 19). Tuition costs at public institutions, for example, increased a dramatic 59 percent between 1994 and 1995, and again between 2004 and 2005. To make matters worse, she says, “median family income” only rose by two percent over this period (Ibid.). Kamenetz further notes that in the two years following 1992, when President Clinton signed a number of these policies into law, “[f]ederal student loan borrowing climbed by 50 percent” (24). And in the following six years, this amount doubled (Ibid.).

⁴¹ Draut is careful to note here that while enrollment increased between 1977 and 2003 by 44 percent, it far from explains the explosion in borrowing, which grew in the same period by 833 percent (Ibid.).

Alternativity and Middle-class-ness

In looking at the experiences and practices I observed and documented in the Brooklyn Country scene, I highlight this instability inherent to middle-class-ness. Specifically, I suggest that the negotiations of class positioning and class meaning I observed within the scene – and particularly the characteristically ambivalent positioning I observed, wherein participants tended to identify both with and against *both* sides of the class spectrum simultaneously – might be seen as symptom of this broader anxiety, at both the symbolic and material levels, and as a strategy devised to address it. It is in this sense that I frame “alternativity” as both a characteristic structure of feeling among middle class subjects, a key mode of experiencing class from within this uncertain middle ground, and as a key tactic or tool for negotiating that positioning – useful in its flexibility, its ability to allow middle class subjects to effectively “play the middle,” hedging against both sides.

Chapter 3: Taste for “Alternatives”

New York City is about as un-country as you can get. Forget about any easy living or rocky tops or green, green grass of home. It just don't get any bigger, louder, or more obnoxious than here, folks.

Yet there's a growing bunch of us, right here in the middle of the world's largest city, who like nothing better than to pick up an old guitar (or a banjo, or a mandolin...) and bang out the sort of rugged, twangy music you'd expect to hear in some beery backroads honky-tonk fifty years ago. We come from all parts of the country – men and women, all ages and backgrounds, brought up on all styles of music. The one thing we all seem to share is a love of old-style country music at its rawest, wildest, and most sincere. That ain't to say that we don't love plenty of new acts, too, or that we cling too tightly to tradition. We just don't have much use for big hair, overproduced sessions, or weak-kneed “crossover” sensations—in other words, we dislike most of the watered-down crap that passes for modern mainstream Nashville country.

– “Uncle Leon,” “Country Music in Brooklyn?” on BrooklynCountry.com

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.

– Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*

In Chapter One, I noted that most participants in the Brooklyn Country scene came to their interest in country music relatively late. Though a few had grown up around the music, typically in rural areas of the country, or in the South, very few had listened to or played it in childhood, or adolescence. Many participants, indeed (including most of those who had country music in their immediate environments), rejected the music for much of their lives, instead choosing to participate in rock, punk, pop, or other genres, as musicians and/or fans. In interviews, participants talked about

their “discovery” or “return” to country – usually in or soon after college, or sometimes upon moving to New York City, for example.

The dominant discourse used to explain this interest within the scene was one of something like “taste.” As Uncle Leon’s “Manifesto,” above, indicates, the attraction to country music was typically framed as a relatively self-conscious choice, a selection of one musical option among many, based on a set of more or less explicit values, priorities and preferences. And, as is the case in most music scenes (and indeed in most fields of “artistic” practice generally), this discourse addressed not just the broad choice of “country music,” but also an array of more subtle preferences and emphases, including those related to subgenre (or sub-subgenre), style, “sound,” technique, form, and so on, as well as a range of less strictly “musical” characteristics. Motives for or approaches to making, listening to, and supporting music, processes of creating (e.g., writing, recording, producing) music, as well as perceived characteristics of performers and audiences, for example, were all part of the discussion. This broad discourse about taste cropped up in casual conversations. It emerged in the songs participants wrote. It was a focus of public discussions of the scene: on organizers’ or bands’ websites, for example, or in interviews participants did with the local press. And it was also a major point of emphasis in the formal interviews I conducted – wherein I typically pursued these issues at some length in the attempt to get a more subtle understanding of individual takes, and of what was at stake for participants.

In this chapter, I explore some of the major themes in this discourse. First, I delineate the two overarching positively articulated preferences within the scene: those for “classic” styles and an “innovative” approach. And I elaborate on some of the ways

in which these tastes were expressed in the music, and the musical (and other related) practice associated with the scene. I then go on to discuss the most prominent negatively articulated preference across the discourse: a broad opposition to “mainstream-ness,” and particularly within this, “commercialism” or “commodification.” I argue that this opposition was, in fact, the most dominant taste articulated within the scene, and that indeed, the preferences for “classic” and “innovative” styles themselves were largely predicated on it. So-called “mainstream-,” “new-,” or “Nashville country,” was usually the first, and most reviled, target in this regard (though there were other components to this aversion as well, as I’ll note).⁴² But the opposition to “mainstream-ness” and “commercialism” was typically posed against a range of broader characteristics, and was articulated against other genres as well.

After outlining some of the major ways in which this negative position was expressed, I go on to explore some of the implications these discursive themes have for

⁴² There were some exceptions to the distaste for Nashville country. For example, when the Country Music Awards were hosted in New York in 2005, some of the major organizers of the scene hosted a “Brooklyn Country Music Awards and CMA Watching Party” event at Hank’s Saloon in Gowanus/Boerum Hill. The tone of the event, overall, was derisive: the show was broadcast via television in the bar, and a group of hosts gave running commentary, mostly poking fun of the artists performing on screen, and the genre generally. A spate of comments were made about performers’ religiosity and artificiality, for example. And AG posed a quiz to the audience during a commercial break: “Gay Porn Flick, or Country Hit,” where titles were read, and the audience was asked to categorize them one way or the other. However, there were moments throughout the night where the hosts attempted to quiet the audience, attentively listen to a performance, and express appreciation for an artist. After the event, I spoke with two of the hosts, and they confirmed this reaction. Both said that they were surprised by their appreciation of some of the music, and qualified their distaste for Nashville country accordingly. Perhaps in a similar spirit, the Watching Party’s original organizer was invited to the Awards themselves at the last minute, and abandoned the event to attend them. (The hosts who did show up at Hanks, however, asked audience members to text “sellout” to his phone as punishment for this interest – reconfirming the dominantly oppositional approach.)

the articulation and negotiation of class positioning within the scene. Following Bourdieu, I argue that these expressions of taste were, in a strong sense, “classifying” practices. On the one hand, as Bourdieu would emphasize, the framing of musical preference *as “taste”* represents an articulation of class “distinction” in and of itself: “The pure aesthetic is rooted in an ethic, or rather, an ethos of elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world...” (1984, 5) But I suggest that the specific constellation of tastes expressed here – the rejection of “mainstream,” “commercialized” music in favor of simultaneously more “authentic” and “innovative” styles, and the particular components and framing of each of these preferences – revealed a more complex, and more *ambivalent* expression of class positioning, wherein both “distinction” from *and alignment with* lower class subjects/subject positions was expressed, and where a certain refusal of higher class subjects/positions was also engaged.

“Classic” but “New,” “Authentic” but “Innovative”

John Schaefer: Make room, indie rockers. There are cowboys in Brooklyn. I'm John Schaefer, and today on Soundcheck: Brooklyn is known as a hub for rock bands, but it turns out there are dozens of country bands there too. And even a country music festival. ... [W]e start with Alex Battles. ... [N]ow, New York does not have, among other things on the radio, a country radio station. This is not Nashville, this is not Texas. How is the country music that's being made, by in large, by you and your peers in Brooklyn...different from what we're getting out of Nashville, for example?

Alex Battles: I like to say that one of the things that I like about being able to make country music in a town without a country music station is that it actually happens kind of in a vacuum. ... [T]here's really no expectations as to what country music is to a New York audience. So it can kind of be whatever you'd like it to be. And if that's more classically-based, or influenced by any other genre of music, it can be.

John Schaefer: So, is that the case, that people in Brooklyn who are doing country music are doing a much older, kind of, more acoustic, simpler, back-to-the-roots version of country?

Alex Battles: It tends to be that way, although they're all- ...it's all *original*. A lot of original bands. People are writing songs, it's not just a bunch of cover bands.

John Schaefer: Right.

Alex Battles: But yeah, it definitely tends to be more of a roots-based sound.

– Interview on 9/4/07 broadcast of local public radio show, Soundcheck (WNYC).

Discussions of musical taste within the scene usually started with a stated preference for “old,” “traditional” or “classic country” sounds, artists and styles. People often described their music using these kinds of terms, calling it: “traditionally oriented,” “vintage,” “old fashioned,” “old school,” or, as Uncle Leon says above, “old-style” country. And they frequently used these kinds of terms in describing the broader array of musics they liked, and drew from:

CS: I tend to use the barometer of the classic country stuff. When I think of country, I think of the classic country. ... [Y]ou know, Merle [Haggard], George Jones, Hank Williams, Johnny Cash ...

...[I like] all kinds of music but especially the old school country from back in the day... (Lindy Loo MySpace Page)

The Jack Grace Band uses anything from Honky Tonk to Bossa Nova to get its point across. And yet, the New York Times probably sums it up best: “Make no mistake: Jack Grace is an old-fashioned country musician.” (The Jack Grace Band Website, Bio Page)

WF: I like that old Bob Wills, you know? *Old* shit.

The range of musics referenced under this rubric was quite broad, spanning the genre's recorded history basically from its inception through, roughly, the late 1970s. But there was a particular emphasis on artists from the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Artists such as Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, George Jones, Dolly Parton, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, and Kitty Wells, among others, for example, were frequently referenced as influences. Their songs were often covered in live sets. And, as noted in Chapter One, they were sometimes the focus of larger-scale events, such as the annual Johnny Cash Birthday Bash, and a wide range of individual "tribute" nights. Similarly, while a radio show hosted by a regular member of the scene was originally conceived, as spanning "almost the entire history of country music before it went to a more glam-y pop-y thing in the late '70s, early '80s," the show later came to focus on music released between the 50s and the 70s (JH).

Participants also expressed their interest in "classic country" by referencing broader "classic" subgenres, such as "honky tonk," "outlaw country," "western swing," or "rockabilly" to describe their own bands, or the broader sound of the scene:

WF: ...[T]here was a period, probably from about 2002 through 2004, where we were just doing this fucking...full slant honky tonk. And, you know, we'd rotate some people. We went down to a five-piece. We lost the banjo and the mandolin. And...without trying to fill in all the blanks, it morphed into more of a western swing and rockabilly type of thing. ...[Y]ou know, honky tonk on the one hand, and, like, hardcore rockabilly on the other. And western swing... You know, a lot of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys type of stuff. And Carl Perkins. And a lot of originals too.

[The Flanks']...barroom-friendly, original, lyric-driven music draws on old-time, jug band, pre-war blues, bluegrass, honky-tonk, and outlaw styles, as well as rock influences like The Band and Little Feat. (The Flanks Website, Bio Page)

TM: I call my band “outlaw country,” because that’s what they called Willie and Waylon.

And some of the sounds and themes identified with these “classic” artists and subgenres were also integrated into local music practice, through instrumentation, for example, or styles of playing, song structures, and lyrics.

In addition to this overarching emphasis on “classic country,” participants also tended to express interest in or incorporate a range of other American music styles that are typically described (and were within the scene) under the title of “roots music,” such as rural blues, or early jazz and “folk” styles, among others. Several artists or bands that played these other styles were included in shows within the scene on a regular basis. Brownbird Rudy Relic, for example, a one-man blues band, was often booked in shows with Brooklyn Country bands.⁴³ And the Two Man Gentlemen Band, who described their music as an “original brand of raucous, retro vaudevillian swing,” was quite visible within the scene as well (The Two Man Gentleman Band Website, Press Page). Several of the individuals and bands that situated themselves more centrally in the “country” genre incorporated components of these other styles in their music as well. And, indeed, a number of participants freely alternated between explicitly identifying themselves as being interested in or playing “country,” and “roots” or “Americana.”

The interest in “classic” musical styles was also elaborated through a broader range of roughly “vintage” or “old timey” expressions within the scene, such as styles of dress and performance, or visual imagery used in posters, flyers, and album covers. Performers and fans of both genders often wore vintage (or vintage-inspired) cowboy

⁴³ “Brownbird” described his own sound as “equal parts pre-war blues, Mexican romantic ballads, 90s R & B and 50s Doo-Wop” (Brownbird Rudy Relic MySpace Page).

shirts, boots or hats, for example. And 1940s or -50s-inspired dresses, in “shirt dress” styles, or gingham prints were common among women. Additionally, a variety show format was quite frequently used in live shows within the scene. The Brooklyn County Fair, the Kings County Opry and the New York City Opry, as well as the annual Johnny Cash Birthday Bash and Brooklyn Country Music Festival (BCMF) all brought together a wide array of bands, and interspersed their performances with short comedic acts, talent performances, or audience contests, all typically in a roughly “vintage” style. Ty Cardacey, for example, was a lasso performer who was asked back to the BCMF for several consecutive years, and there were a few large events that featured burlesque dancers between acts. As I’ll discuss later, one participant, a stand-up comedian who performed as a Minnie Pearl-inspired character, was a near constant at shows within the scene, often being asked to emcee events, or perform short comedic interludes between bands. Similarly, raffles and audience contests were common at shows. As indicated earlier, the BCMF, for example, awarded ten or so homemade pies, baked by friends of the scene each year to audience members who won “best dancer,” “skinniest man,” or other ad hoc challenges invented by the host. At a broader range of events, emcees and performers often used a kind of folksy, old timey conversational style in interacting with audiences, referring to each other as “fellas” or “gals,” for example, or the crowd as “friends.” It was also fairly common for musicians in the scene to create old timey stage names. “Dock Oscar” and “Uncle Leon,” for example, were the monikers of two central figures in the scene. These names were often humorous and highly ironic, excessively marking the rusticity (or sometimes, explicitly, rural ignorance) associated with “classic”

styles.⁴⁴ “Perfessor Zeke” [*sic*], for example, clearly functioned in this way. Similarly, nearly every member of the “whackabilly” band, The Defibulators (the name itself an ironic iteration of linguistic ignorance) had such a moniker, with “Bug” at the helm, “Roadblock” on lead guitar, “Metalbelly” on washboard and other percussion instruments, and “Smitty” on fiddle. Finally, the imagery and language people used to advertise or promote their bands or events also bore the mark of this kind of “vintage” approach. Bands often used “old timey” and/or “western”-inspired fonts on album covers, flyers or websites, or otherwise imitated the look of broadly “vintage” LPs or advertisements. The use of self-consciously faded or sepia-toned photographs, and mock nineteenth/early twentieth-century portraits was also common in these materials. And in a similar vein (but usually referring to a slightly later historical period), there was a significant amount of imagery of rural, small-town, or sometimes industrial decay.⁴⁵

There was always keen attention paid, however, to not *over*-emphasizing this allegiance to older styles, and participants were quick to underscore their simultaneous prioritization of *newness*, innovation, and authorship. For example, participants often stressed that they were primarily interested in playing *original* music, as opposed to covers of these “classic” songs, as Alex Battles says in the radio interview, above. And the interest in “classic” styles was often emphatically qualified with the assertion that participants were trying to do something new with these styles, take them in “new directions,” “pave new paths,” and so on. RD said in an interview, for example, that his

⁴⁴ I discuss the uses of this kind of irony in detail in Chapter Five.

⁴⁵ See Appendix A for sample images of all of the above. The use of emulated materiality was particularly notable in these items. In Figure 4, for example, grooves were added to Alex Battles’ CD to imitate the look and texture of an LP; in Figures 8-11, images are fashioned to resemble three-dimensional, aging papers, books, photos, etc.

band was interested in using older styles as a musical foundation, or “base,” from which to create “individual,” music.

...[O]ur intent is really to sort of mix up roots music, you know, blues, folk, country, honky-tonk...rockabilly... And...you know, play that stuff with some authenticity. Use that as a base. ... But then we want to feel like we’re...making individual music in our own way. (RD)

In a biography on his band’s MySpace page, “Matt Rockteacher” expressed a similar approach:

Matt Rockteacher — a Brooklyn-based singer and guitar hero who heads the emerging Brooklyn Country outfit the Rockteacher Band — lists influences from Gram Parsons to Joy Division, and from Albert Lee to Link Wray. One would be as equally justified filing this adventurous troupe under Country as they would under Rockabilly, Garage Rock or Folk Rock. “It sounds like the Replacements record that fell in a bucket of chicken grease,” remarks engineer Byron Scott as the band finishes a mix on the new single, “Control.” But, like most path-paving denizens on the contemporary Brooklyn Country circuit, Rockteacher is in it to create something new under the sun. (Nashville Stranger MySpace Page)

Indeed, bios on websites and MySpace pages tended to express the combined interest in “traditionalism” and “innovation” particularly frequently and explicitly:

In an ideal world, country radio would sound more like the Doc Marshalls. With influences ranging from traditionalists such as Buck Owens and Johnny Cash to innovators like Gram Parsons and Dwight Yoakam, this New York City-based five-piece delivers an honest, unflinching honky tonk sound. (The Doc Marshalls MySpace Page)

An adventurous take on Americana, the M SHANGHAI STRING BAND's songs are not easily classified. They are reminiscent of traditional roots music styles, yet innovative in their musical form and modern lyrical content. The dynamics range from barnstorming breakdowns to achingly beautiful ballads, expressing originality and simplicity in the same breath. (The M Shanghai String Band MySpace Page)

While Kara's timeless lyrics and powerhouse vocal delivery are filled with signposts pointing to the classic influence of musicians like Emmylou Harris, Neil Young, and Dolly Parton, there is also a fresh and modern sensibility. With the high-octane drive of the ever formidable band, the Gojo Hearts, the songs steer

clear of predictability. (Kara Suzanne and the Gojo Hearts MySpace Page)

The DEFiBULATORs jump-start new life into vintage country music and deliver a unique sound that's anything but old timey. (The Defibulators Website, Band Page)

Infused with the twangy, bare-bones rumble of Sun Records, inspired by the renegade spirit of Waylon, Willie, and Merle, and topped off with the kind of fermented-honey baritone that most folks thought died with Johnny Cash, Uncle Leon and the Alibis seem bound and determined to knock current "country" music off its slick high horse, and kick its ass all the way back to the gritty honky-tonk roads it grew up on.

But don't let the retro roots fool you: For every classic-sounding country shuffle, there's a Cramps-style freak fest, or a fuzzy, punked-out Stones cover waiting to happen. (Uncle Leon and the Alibis Website, Bio Page)

In the spirit of combining "traditional" and "innovative" approaches, members of the scene often referenced a range of more "folk-" or "rock-" affiliated musicians, whose work related to country in a variety of ways, as influences. Gram Parsons, Emmylou Harris, Bob Dylan and Neil Young were especially commonly cited in this regard, as were a range of artists and bands that tend to be identified with the "alternative country" title, such as Lucinda Williams, Gillian Welch, Steve Earle and Wilco, among others. SL, for example, talked in our interview about her appreciation for Wilco and Jeff Tweedy (the current projects of former Uncle Tupelo band members, who are widely credited with originating alternative country, as discussed) as being country influenced bands that had "genre crossing" capabilities. And JF highlighted his admiration of Gram Parsons, Neil Young, and Emmylou Harris, as well as more contemporary artists/bands like Steve Earle, Lucinda Williams, Ryan Adams, the Bottle Rockets and the Yawhoos, all for the way in which they incorporated "rock" elements into the country sound.

Similarly, when I interviewed DW, I asked whether he saw connections between the Brooklyn country scene and other local scenes, such as the bluegrass scene, or another, more Manhattan-based country scene that had been more active and visible in the late 1990s (and had also been more expressly aligned with “alternative country”). His response was somewhat meandering (a tendency in all of our interviews and conversations), but he talked at some length about how he thought that bluegrass and, in fact, “alternative country” (and here he actually conflated the two genres) tended to be too faithful to classic styles, emphasizing simply re-creating them over “pushing new boundaries.” He said that he valued the music of Neil Young and Bob Dylan because they drew from “classic” styles, but still made innovative, “singular” music:

KH: Are you yourself interested in bluegrass?

DW: I like playing it. I love playing it. But would I want to do it full-time? Not really. Like, I’ve often wanted to play in a like a Western Swing band. That would be awesome. But like...I want to make music that...pushes new boundaries. And I don’t feel like alternative country does that.

KH: How come?

DW: It just seems like it’s...riding on the coattails of the form. ...People who take the influence and then run with it, like Neil Young, that’s more like, what I’d like to be. ...Because Neil Young’s like his own fucking *genre*. ...On his albums, it’ll be like, a county-influenced song and then a doo-wop song, and then...a folk song, and then... You know, you never know where he’s going next. ...Like, *After the Gold Rush*, do you know that album?

KH: Mm hm.

DW: ... It’s a *singular piece of art*. ... [L]ike, people love it, but...the only justification they can give is it’s so different from anything else. ... Bob Dylan’s the same way. ...It just falls into its own genre. Even though the songs, like, the guitar work on them and stuff is not that complicated... When you hear a song like...Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall [or]...later on, something from, like, Blonde on Blonde- Nobody’s ever written something like that. And...that’s why I like it. But at the same time, you know, you ask Bob Dylan to play Blue Moon of Kentucky and he can do it. ... Like...he understands...the past, and incorporates

it into his own new thing. And I feel like alternative country takes the past, and then...just doesn't push the envelope.

Several participants, in fact, made this kind of criticism of bluegrass specifically, arguing that the music and its practice lacked an independent spirit, and that its tendency to emphasize mastering older songs and styles of playing was “boring,” or lacked the expressiveness, or artistic merit of more “original” work. When I asked SB about the extent to which he related to the local bluegrass and “old time” scenes, for example, he said:

SB: Yeah. I don't relate to them at *all*. [KH: [Laughs.] Ok.] I think bluegrass people are boring. I think they're, like, worse than '60s folk people, who just, like: ...You want to hang out with the dumbest people? It's *them*. Just *so boring*. And, you know, there's a couple of them in there that are the exception to the rule... So [speaking into the microphone] if anybody hears this recording, you're probably the exception to the rule. [KH: Laughs.] But you *know* the rest of them are fucking boring to hang out with...

I don't know... Look, I'm glad there's some people out there doing the good work of keeping things that already happened alive... I put them in the same group as the people that run around in Civil War outfits... [And] sure...if I was down there somewhere on the battlefield, I'd like to go see people re-create that stuff. You know... [If...I were somewhere on a sunny day, I'd hear a bluegrass band sound *exactly* like...Bill Monroe. But, you know...people are not going to listen to [that band], they're going to listen to Bill Monroe!

Overall, SB was probably the most emphatic of everyone I spoke with about the importance of originality and individuality. When I asked him about his take on both “mainstream” and “alternative” country as genres, he quickly dismissed “mainstream country” categorically, and then moved on to eschew this kind of categorization entirely for his own musical practice, saying that “country” was really “just a term,” and didn't encompass his work, or that of the artists he respected, who were all “doing their own music.” And later in our conversation, when I asked him to follow up on a previous

interview in which he had mentioned that, as a club booker, he could predict which country bands were long-lasting and which were not, based on whether or not they “dressed the part,” he turned back to this point. He said that he felt lately that the “country” title generally, and the practice of dressing up specifically, “pigeon holed” him to prospective fans, and that he was starting to move away from both in the interest of emphasizing his band’s originality. He said that, like other country musicians he respected, he felt that he wasn’t just playing “country music,” but was instead “doing his songs.” And he went on, at some length, about his distaste for a more “retro” approach that tried to simply “recreate” older songs or styles. He said he wanted to always “do something new,” and “make his mark”:

SB: ...I haven’t been [dressing up] for years...because I felt...sometimes the country label, or, dressing the part, was starting to sell short what I was doing. ... I still love those outfits, but I just am finding myself in a phase where I don’t want to be pigeon-holed before I start playing...

KH: So would you say that you’re sort of moving away from an emphasis on country generally? ...

SB: No, I wouldn’t say that. It’s just that... If you get...Merle Haggard in a room, he’s going to tell you about how...connected he is in the history of country... You know, and all his heroes are country. But...even Merle Haggard doesn’t just think of his music as country. He just writes his stuff. And does his songs. You know, and that’s what *I* do. And I just think, like...anybody who’s...really trying to do something *new*... You can’t keep calling yourself...a term. Because...then, you’re just going to keep rehashing the past. ...You know, we’re working on a new album right now, and it’s got mariachi horns on it. That...last song we did? The truck driver song? Got gorgeous mariachi horns on it. ... I have no interest in being alive to, like, try to do a *retro* truck driving sound. That already happened. The point is...it’s got weird chords in it that were not in traditional truck driving songs. And...when people hear the recording... It’s showing a sense of history to one thing. But it’s not trying to *be* something that already happened. And that’s what *bores me to hell*. Like, everyone, like, trying to recreate something. ...You know, I’ve got one go around, and I’m here to make my mark, and have something...that’s going to make it last. ...I’m here to make good shit. And, stuff that hasn’t happened.

The prioritization of innovation often, indeed, revealed itself in the ways people defined, or sometimes *refused* to define, their music by genre. As noted in Chapter One, many participants created new titles for the type of “country” they played, such as “art country,” or “whackabilly,” or, the most extreme case, “Fatback Spo-de-o-de.” Many people also eschewed identification with *any* existing title, usually with the argument that such terms failed to capture the ingenuity or individuality of their musical work, as SB suggests above. In the interview with RD referenced above, he made a very similar argument. When I asked him how he categorized his band by genre, he first hedged, suggesting a few titles, but indicating that he did not fully relate to them. And he went on to say that he felt that genre terms, in general, were basically “brands,” “word[s] they came up with to help market the music.” And he said that as such, these titles tended not to capture musical practice that was, in truth, “individual.” He said that his band’s goal was to use a variety of “roots music” styles as a basis from which to create original music. Rather than blindly “replicating” the components of the “brands” those genres have become, creating a “cliché” or “cartoon”-like version of those styles, he said that he and his band sought to make “individual music”:

RD: I mean, Americana is nice, because...I like, in a way, the genres more that...don’t mean *anything*. And that’s what Americana really means. But I mean...in a weird way, [my band] would almost more fit into... There was a movement, like, in the late 80s in country music...called “neo-traditionalist.” [KH: Yeah.] ...And actually if you listen to those records...they have more steel guitar and stuff, but they’re still produced to sound pretty crappy. You know, so-I wouldn’t want to tie us into like a... You know, it really- It’s just a *brand*. It’s like advertising or something... It’s the word they came up with to help market the music back then...

[I]t’s funny...those styles have, like, become a style that has a name on it. And if you hear that style, you say, “Oh, that’s *that* kind of music.” But in a way...there was probably no band that ever actually *sounded* like whatever the- It’s like a

cliché. I mean, like, rockabilly, for instance. When people think of rockabilly, they think of slicked back hair, tattoos...an upright bass with flames on it... And it's like a cartoon... But the funny thing is, you look back at rockabilly bands from the time that rockabilly actually happened: Carl Perkins doesn't look like that. Elvis doesn't look like that... Johnny Cash sounds...more like country or folk music, you know? It's like...maybe there was *one* band back there that actually sort of sounded kind of like that. Like maybe... Gene Vincent maybe was a *little* bit, like, that sort of cartoon. But what ends up happening is, some band sort of...hits on the image. And then...it becomes like a replication of this one conglomeration of ideas that people have now *branded* rockabilly. Now when people think of rockabilly, they think of the upright bass with flames. They don't think of all these *individuals*, who all made *individual music*. You know.

So...we really get into learning, like, how to actually...play this music, as authentically as we can. But then we want to feel like we're just making individual music in our own way...the way anybody does... [W]e...try to stay away from being the, kind of, cartoon assistant to this...brand or whatever.

Finally, the emphasis on “originality” or “individuality” was expressed not only in explicit discourse within the scene, but also in the music people made, as well as in a variety of practices that surrounded the music. Musicians and bands incorporated sounds, instruments, or other musical components/techniques from a wide range of non-country (as well as non-“roots”) genres. Several bands covered hip-hop songs, for example, such as Uncle Leon's rendition of Sir Mix-A-Lot's “Baby Got Back.” Rench framed their music broadly as a hybrid of the two genres (sometimes calling it “hick-hop”). Other stylistic references ran the gamut, as indicated above, from mariachi to punk. Similarly, styles of dress, while often incorporating “country,” or “vintage” elements, often also incorporated more contemporary tastes, and/or evoked roughly punk or indie-rock musical styles or conventions. LD, for example, paired her floral smock dresses and cowboy boots with bright red-dyed hair, and when some members of the Doc Marshalls or the Defibulators wore western shirts or cowboy boots, others wore faded t-shirts and Converse All-Stars. Album covers, posters and flyers similarly mixed influences in this

way, using original artwork or incorporating band portraits or candid bar/studio photos more common in the (typically “indie”) rock tradition, for example.⁴⁶

The “Enemy”: Nashville, Pop, the “Commercial Mainstream”

In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (‘sick-making’) of the tastes of others... Aversion to different life-styles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes...

– Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*

...I couldn’t care *less* about- All new country is just new pop. It’s just...the enemy.

– SB

The preferences for “classic” and “innovative” styles or approaches were the most common positively articulated tastes within the scene. But there was an overarching negatively articulated taste expressed as well: an opposition to “mainstream-ness,” and particularly, within this, “commercialism.” Indeed, the emphases on the “classic” and “innovative” were largely predicated on, and were often explicitly posed in terms of, a broader *distaste* for something like “mainstream,” “commercial” music, and culture. That is, “classic country” was often prioritized in a framework of being “authentic,” “raw,” and pre-commercial. And “innovation” was often prioritized in a framework of being “artistic,” and “individualistic,” and thereby superseding “commercial” interests, and “mainstream” tastes. Some of the examples given above clearly point to this broader emphasis. JH’s claim that country went “glam-y, pop-y” in the 1980s, the period she considers the upper limit of “classic” styles, RD’s comments about resisting genre

⁴⁶ See Appendix B for sample images

identification in terms of its ties to “branding,” for example, each make this tie. But there was also a broader discourse opposing these categories, and the music and culture that participants associated with them. I would now like to explore some of the primary ways in which this broad, oppositional taste was articulated within the scene.

First, though, it’s important to note that within this discourse of distaste, the opposition to so-called “mainstream,” “new,” or “Nashville country” was particularly common. Nashville country was broadly seen to be bad music by participants in the scene, and there was a certain amount of overt criticism of it as artistically bankrupt, politically backward, and, as I’ll discuss in more detail later, more or less explicitly associated with a (denigrated) rural, or suburban lower/middle class. Participants described it as “corny,” or implied that its musicians and audiences were ignorant, for example:

AG: [U]sually the first reaction that I get [when I tell people I play country music] is “You can play that music in New York?” And the second reaction I get, if they actually come and hear it is, “Oh, I really like that stuff. I thought it was going to be, like, Travis Tritt or something.” [Laughs.] You know like, they thought it was going to be like this really corny, flag-waving, kind of, shiny shirt, Nashville stuff, you know. I mean, and it’s not that. It’s much more rootsier in terms of, like, here’s like, bar music to dance to, you know? ...I mean, not *line* dance to, but...

MB: ...[A local public radio show] wanted [my help] to do something on the Country Music Awards. And once they had me at the studio, they saw that I make fun of that too. And I was similar *minded* to them. Because at first they were like, “I don’t know, like [indistinguishable] country guy.” That’s where I think these intellectuals...like [the show’s host], they got to learn, a little something about this Brooklyn Country scene, like: “Oh, they’re all really *smart*. Well *read*. And, like, they’re all *liberals*.” You know... Because the thing about Brooklyn Country, like, it’s *all liberals*. There’s not one person, like [in a gruff voice with a southern accent]: “Yuh- Don’t tread on *me*!” None of that bullshit here, you know? Which is one of the things I love about it.

This was an important strain in the discourse that I don't want to underemphasize here. However, it was striking that in these discussions of taste, participants in the scene more frequently criticized Nashville country in broader terms, as being too "mainstream," and particularly, overdetermined by commercial interests. And this refusal was quite often extended to a broader set of targets as well. "Mainstream," or "pop" music *generally*, for example, or "mass-produced" culture were often posed as the larger "enemies" within the scene. As TM said in an interview, for example:

TM: I actually don't listen to [mainstream country]. There's not a country station in town. I don't actively buy albums. ...Mainstream, you know, I guess- When I was in high school, Garth Brooks was in his height. I couldn't tell you what he's doing now... I kind of just don't listen to any of it if it's that Garth Brooks era. ...I have *nothing* against Garth Brooks or Brooks and Dunn, or any of those guys. Reba McIntire. It's just- It's mostly pop to me. You know? ...It did what everything else did in the nineties, unfortunately. Everything turned lukewarm. You know, punk was punk, and then it became pop punk. And it's still got its edge, but when seven *thousand* bands exist instead of, you know, a couple hundred? It's not very edgy. Country went through this thing in the eighties with, you know, being popularized, and, you know, freaking, like, Kenny Rodgers was very pop country. And then it was very hard to claim your roots back. And now it's kind of too late for it. You know, there are bands doing it, but they're not the popular bands... So if you hear anything mainstream, it's kind of watered down to me...

And, as CS said when I asked him why he disliked "Nashville country":

CS: [I]t's kind of like any pop music. It wouldn't necessarily be Nashville... It's like any kind of music now where, I think, the product is more important than the music. Like, the most popular music being played, whether it's country or not, it's just concocted crap. ...You just get caught up in this whole- I don't know, it's like a lot of hype. It's like anything else. It's like mass-produced whatever... I mean, I don't really have anything against Nashville *per se*? It's just the idea of, just, mass-produced garbage.

Because of this emphasis on the “mainstream-ness” or “commercial” quality of Nashville country, and the persistent presence of a broader rejection of these larger concepts/categories, I focus my discussion here on these areas.⁴⁷

The “Raw” and the “Slick”- the Issue of “Production Value”

One of the primary ways in which “commercialism” was opposed within the scene was through a discussion about musical “sound,” and, specifically, something like “production value.”⁴⁸ The merits of “raw,” “rough,” or “gritty,” versus “slick” or “glossy” sound qualities were consistently argued. Generally, the former qualities were associated with older musicians, recordings and styles, as well as new music from the scene itself, and an array of “alternative” styles. The latter qualities were particularly commonly associated with “Nashville country,” but were also referenced in talk about “pop” or “mainstream” music generally. Indeed, among the most common criticisms of Nashville country within the scene was that it was too “glossy” or “slick,” or that it was “overproduced,” as Uncle Leon says, above, or had bad “production value.” For example, in an interview with JH, who hosted a weekly college radio show featuring “classic country” music, had her own band that circulated in the Brooklyn Country scene,

⁴⁷ In Chapter Five, I go into greater detail on the ways in which country music, and particularly “mainstream,” or “Nashville” country (and the social and cultural world referenced in and by it) was sometimes denigrated as “trash” by participants in the scene – largely in an ironic mode. The conservative, nationalistic politics associated with the music are particularly highlighted here, as are the racial associations and politics hinted in the examples above. It was interesting, and probably not unimportant, that this critique was largely articulated inexplicitly in this way. My sense was that this was related to a motive not to too overtly look down on these performers and their audiences.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., A. Fox (2008) and Meintjes (2003) for further discussion on the issue of “production value.”

and participated as a fan more broadly, I asked whether she'd had much contact with other local country radio shows. She first noted the relative paucity of shows focused on the genre. Making reference to a recent Dolly Parton concert at Radio City Music Hall, where Parton had called attention to the City's lack of a country-dedicated station, JH went on to say that she was glad that New York didn't have a (by implication, "mainstream") country station. And she elaborated on her distaste for "Nashville" broadly. She said that one of the things she most strongly disliked about the music, and that most clearly distinguished it from the music she valued and that her friends in the scene played, was its "production value," and the "veneer" that that (vague) characteristic gave the music:

JH: You know, it's funny. We saw Dolly Parton the other night. [KH: Oh yeah? I was there too.] And [nodding] she read those questions. ...[S]he's like, "You know, you guys don't have a country radio station, but somebody sent me these." And I'm kind of thinking that she just answers those questions at every show. [KH: Right.] But, it's true. There is no...country station. Which is actually *fine* with me...because I really have a tenuous personal relationship with Nashville, and all that it stands for, you know [laughs]. I mean...the thing with Nashville is there's some really truly talented- Almost everybody who's a star from Nashville *is* actually a talented person. I mean, they can *all sing*. They can sing circles around a lot of *us*. And there's a few people that are good songwriters. But in general, the songwriting material and the production value is terrible. And...it creates this whole veneer that I just really, really hate. And, I can't connect it up to what I play. It just doesn't seem to fit. You know, if Toby Keith came to town, and wanted to be on my show, [pausing] I'd definitely say yes [laughs]. But, you know, it would be really strange. It wouldn't seem to fit. You know, it's strange that...two guys who live in Long Island City, who play Old Timey music, are more apt to be on a country radio show than, you know, Toby Keith. But, it's true.

Similarly, when I asked RD how he defined the term "alternative country" (a title he used, albeit with some equivocation, to describe his own music), he contrasted it to Nashville country, and said that the main difference between the two was the sound

created by Nashville's "production." He said that this quality/process made Nashville country sound, undesirably, like "pop music." And he directly tied the sound to a commercial incentive, something that he said "alternative" artists refused to give in to:

RD: Really, more than anything, I mean...if you listen to what's on country radio, I think most people will agree that...the production is just awful. You know, I mean it's just- It makes it sound like pop music... So I think a big part of it's just the production... If you want to, like, get on country radio and make the big bucks...there's no choice but to have your record sound like one of those records. And...I think alternative country, partly, was just people being like, "Well, we really like how this music sounds, and we're not going to make our records sound like shit just to sell them."

As opposed to poor/"over" "production," or the "glossy," "slick" sounds participants thought it created, Brooklyn Country participants often expressed a preference for (equally undefined) "roughness," "grittiness" or "rawness." When I asked SL, about her feelings about "mainstream country," for example, she talked about her preference for artists and sounds that were more "gritty" and "interesting," as opposed to Nashville's "slick," "glossy" and "formulaic" qualities:

KH: What do you think about, sort of, like, mainstream country, or whatever you would call it. Some people call it Nashville country.

SL: Yeah, slick country? Everyone's always like, "You should go to Nashville." And I'm always like, [somewhat self-mockingly] "*Please*." You know. [KH: Laughs.] "Brooklyn's so much cooler." Yeah, I really think it's formulaic and boring, and the voices are boring, and- Boring. Yeah. Production's boring. Too glossy. I don't like glossy. So. I love what people like Lucinda [Williams]- Even, sometimes Lucinda's a little glossy. Yeah, she's the most amazing songwriter. I love her stuff. Gillian Welch. Like, so amazing. That stuff is, like...gritty and interesting. [The] voices are interesting. The production's interesting... I prefer that.

Similarly, when I asked AG what kinds of country music he liked, he said that he valued a "roughness" in not only country music, but in a range of genres. And he directly

opposed this to “slick” and “overproduced” musics generally, which he saw, in a way similar to RD, above, as primarily motivated by commercial interests:

KH: [H]ow do you, sort of, define what you like...in terms of country stuff? ...

AG: Well, I mean, I like all sorts of things, first of all. It’s not like I do nothing but go out to country-type shows. There are certain qualities that appeal to me more than a particular style. My own personal taste is, anything that seems too slick to me, too overproduced, too obviously *trying* to be some sort of idea of commercial success, that just turns me off. No matter who that is. If it’s a blues band, I’d rather hear the kind of, like, rough around the edges old guy that...sounds like he’s ready to have a heart attack, over, like...Eric Clapton and ten other guys on stage. You know what I’m saying? And that’s my preference. I don’t lose sleep over bands I don’t like, but I think in general, I probably value...that particular approach a little more, rather than, “Oh, they play this style,” or “I don’t like anything with a banjo.” [Laughs.]

Several participants, in fact, directly linked this “slick,” or “overproduced” quality to an overriding commercial incentive. When I asked JF what he thought of Nashville country, he quickly made this tie:

JF: The short answer is that...mainstream, Nashville country is the *worst dreck out there*. You know, I would rather listen to...any midriff-baring teenager than any of that stuff. I just think it’s *vile*. But it has been for a long time, I mean that’s nothing new.

KH: What is it about it that’s vile? I mean, a lot of people say that, but-

JF: Well, it’s just- and this is what’s always been wrong with it. It’s way too slick, it’s way too maudlin, it’s way too schmulzy. It’s just... It’s gross. I guess it just...it smacks of *sales* and shit. It doesn’t feel *real*. It doesn’t get you anywhere, you know? Doesn’t make you feel anything.

And, when I asked WF the same question, he said that he thought Nashville country was “syrupey” and “saccharine,” and that, while country music has always been marked by “commercial” incentives, he thought that the music that is “being pushed” onto the radio now is somehow more commercial, more “corporate.” Under that influence, he said, a “human element” has been lost:

WF: I'm pretty much with a lot of folks around here in terms of the fact that, when I go out of the city, and there are country music stations, Nashville stations, I turn them on, like, "Oh, let's see what's going on here." And, there's a couple [people], like Gretchen Wilson, and a couple others that, you know, "Oh, that's a pretty good song." Gretchen Wilson [plays] pretty much rock 'n' roll songs, whatever... You know, but I just always wind up switching it off after ten-fifteen minutes, because I just can't take it. I can't take it. That shit is so fucking nasty to me. I'm sorry.

KH: What is it about it that's nasty to you?

WF: Just the syrupy, syrupy fucking- I don't know. I can't even explain it. It's just so saccharine, and fucking, you know, *ugh* [he shudders]. I like that old Bob Wills, you know? Old shit... I mean, it doesn't even have to be old. There's people doing that shit nowadays. But I'm talking about shit that actually made it on to the radio back then. [KH: Right.] You know, and the shit that's being pushed onto the radio now. I used to think it was...people complaining...[about] the whole "corporate radio" thing. It's like...radio's always been corporate. But it never *has* been corporate the way it is now... It was always about money...it's always been commercial. But, [now] somehow the human element's been sucked the fuck out of it. You know? It's terrible. The way it's produced, the way it's written, the chords they choose, the words. It's all wrong. It's like, "Damn. What'd you do with this music that I love?"⁴⁹

"Corporate" Music - "the Industry" or "the Market" as Driving Forces

There was indeed a broader discussion within the scene of the ways in which Nashville country, and other "mainstream" or "pop" musics were, undesirably, driven by "commercial" forces in a variety of ways. This was often framed as opposed to music driven by "creative" or "expressive" motives, or "artistic" intent, but the argument was

⁴⁹ This kind of gendering of the "slick"/commercial characteristic (where it points to an artificial sweetness or "sentimentality"), as well as a more general feminization of commercial/mass culture (and masculinization of its opposites) showed up periodically in my research. See, e.g., Huyssen (1987) for further discussion of this tie. Pamela Fox (2009) also provides a rich account of the ways in which the broader alternative country genre has tended to maintain some strongly misogynistic assumptions in its articulated versions of the "authentic." One key domain in which she identifies this tendency is through the analysis of this kind of discourse about alt.country's and/or classic country's "grittiness" and mainstream country's "gloss."

also often intertwined with the notion that a certain “authenticity” associated with older styles and artists was lost under the commercial incentive. When I asked AG what he thought of Nashville country, for example, he talked about how there were certain Nashville-affiliated artists who he appreciated, and clarified that, overall, it wasn’t “the talent” that he objected to, but rather the overriding interference of “the industry,” its interests, and its representatives, in the music-making process. Under this influence, he said, “artistic” intent tends to be lost:

AG: I think if you went to the city of Nashville too, you’d find people that [don’t like a lot of mainstream country music]. [Laughs.] And I mean, it’s like, actors in Hollywood. I mean, I’m sure tons of them have done Shakespeare and love it to death, but they also know what the industry’s going to go for, and what they’re going to do to be in that industry, you know? Some people ride that line, some people try to buy into it. I mean, there’s...a group of songwriters in Nashville that actually get together just to do their own stuff, completely separate from that. And...you know, when I pick on Nashville, it’s the industry. It’s like picking on Hollywood... I don’t have anything against the talent. Like, god knows I can’t play as well as most of the people there... It’s just, it’s corporate music, you know? It’s like anything else... Between what an artist wants to do, and that record that ends up on the shelf at Wal-Mart, you’ve got a lot of people who aren’t musicians saying how things should be done. And I think you find that in any genre. You know, it’s just another casualty of that in my opinion.

When I interviewed CS, he similarly said that he didn’t like mainstream country for the same reason he didn’t like “pop music” generally: because he thought “the product” was “more important than the music” in these genres. He described these musics as “mass produced” and “concocted,” and he talked about the structures that support them as being more motivated by “money” than by a sincere interest or investment in “music.” He talked, for example, about that fact that when the Country Music Awards show was hosted in New York recently (and for the first time), the organization had been entirely uninterested in seeking out or promoting local country

bands or shows. And he attributed this disinterest to the poorly capitalized status of the local scene, drawing a sharp distinction between the local interest in “art,” and the mainstream industry’s interest in “commerce”:

CS: I mean, I don’t really have anything against Nashville *per se*? It’s just the idea of, just, mass-produced garbage... And also too, I mean...when the CMAs were held in New York City, it was just a kick in the pants that there was no effort to even look at anything remotely country [in the local scene]. And...who cares who it would have been, but it was like- You know, imagine if it had been in Austin. You’d think they would have maybe found an Austin band to play, or two. But in New York...it could have been anywhere, you know? ... [T]hat was weird... What a disconnect. And it’s like...I don’t know if it’s so much active disdain...[as it is that] there’s nobody here with a million freaking dollars that’s producing country bands that can be easily digested for people in New York City. It’s totally local... You know, if I was Joe Blow Producer at Blah Blah record label waltzing over, then you bet your ass they would have had something for me... Or if there was a country radio station with lots of money, you know? But they’re not interested in local music. They’re just making *money*. [Whispering] See that’s the *problem*. Art and commerce: not a good combination.

When I asked JM in an interview what he thought about Nashville country, he posed a similar criticism, but with a slightly different emphasis. Here, he made reference to a stridently anti-Nashville song by Robbie Fulks, which denounces the music as “soft rock feminist crap” catering to a “moron market,” and describes its artists as “assholes” and (offensively, if perhaps ironically) “faggot[s] in...hat[s].” JM said that he agreed with Fulks’s interpretation of Nashville country, and that he thought that the preferences of a specific “market,” a “target segment” of middle-aged, single women, and the industry’s interest in selling to it, tends to drive the music.⁵⁰ He said that this process has not only driven a group of highly “talented” musicians, whose musical values he said likely align with his own, to play “really shitty songs,” but it has also erased all traces of “original country,” changing the genre into a kind of alienated, valueless form:

⁵⁰ The feminization of mass culture shows up again here.

KH: What's your view of Nashville country...how do you relate to it?

JM: A bunch of really talented people, playing *really* shitty songs. Or a bunch of really shitty people playing really good songs. Or whatever. I mean...I hate saying this because it's snobby and dumb, but there's a lowest common denominator factor that's going on. I mean, you want to hear about Nashville, just listen to *Fuck This Town* by Robbie Fulks. It's like, that's what it is. It's like, the market they sell to is 35-year-old, single- what will turn these women on, OK? What will make them buy a record? What will make them keep the radio on for the next song? And so, the songs they pick tend to be overly sentimental, sweeping ballads, and stuff that relates to that target segment. And for that target segment has done really well...

I always liken this to R & B. You know, R & B in the 50s was Ray Charles and it was fun and it was [indistinguishable]. And now, R & B means sweeping ballads, you know? Whatever, they market it to black people... You know, it's effectively the same thing. And it doesn't mean that the original R & B doesn't exist. It doesn't mean the original country doesn't exist. It's just that the name has changed...

...I mean look, if I went to Nashville, and I sat down in a room full of people who are in those bands, who are writing those songs, and I started to get a CasHank going, they would all be with me. Don't get me wrong, they would all be with me. Because they all love that shit. It's just that, for whatever reasons...there's something driving the market that these people who like the same shit [that I do]...and who knows, some of them might even like my dumb band... But for some reason, the market wants to hear them play, you know, *Jesus Takes the Wheel*. You ever hear that song? [KH: Yeah...] Carrie Underwood... Fucking awful song... By a girl who's got good pipes. Probably by a songwriter who...wrote one of my favorite songs, you know? ...

Finally, Uncle Leon and the Alibis' song, *Me 'n' Hank*, similarly vilifies the "industry" for Nashville country's badness. The song tells the story of the narrator's encounter with the hitchhiking ghost of Hank Williams, his own attempt to "set [the] country music business right" by reintroducing Williams and his "honky tonk" sound into it, and their shared disillusionment at the way in which "Nashville" tries to commodify him. Here, the sound engineer, the technologized process of "production," the "marketing" incentive, and the "executive" intervention, are all framed as conspiring

against Hank's artistic motives, as well as his authentic "hillbilly" sound (and image). After being prodded to offer "something a little more fancy," in sound and style, Hank returns, disillusioned, to his "honky tonk in the sky," rejoining a classic country cohort for "his kind of pickin' and wailin'":

Uncle Leon and the Alibis
 "Me 'n' Hank"
Uncle Leon and the Alibis (2006)
 Copyright Leon Chase⁵¹

Well I was driving alone
 Down a long dirt road
 One cold and lonesome night

When I seen this pale, skinny fella'
 Hunched over in the rain
 With a guitar at his side

...

Well I felt a chill in my soul
 And that's when I knew that this would be no ordinary ride
 For it was none other than the ghost of Hank Williams
 Just sittin' there, right by my side

...

Well we turned on that country radio
 But we couldn't find us one banjo or a fiddle or even a solo guitar
 It seems those old honky tonk sounds, they were just nowhere to be found
 Not even on NPR

So I looked at Hank, and I started to think
 And, well, I'd be lyin' if I said I didn't see some dollar signs
 I said, "Hank, you're comin' with me down to Nashville, Tennessee.
 We're gonna set this here country music business right."

...

Well the very next night, we booked us some studio time

⁵¹ Lyrics were transcribed from the sound recording, and have been edited for length.

And there stood Hank moanin' as only old Hank could
 But that sound engineer, he had some other ideas
 He said, "Man, it's gonna take a lot to make this guy sound good."

He said, "You put down that guitar, we'll add some tracks later on, get a cute blonde singer and a bunch of session guys.
 We'll add some EQ and some keys, maybe a nice dance beat. Here, Hank, try this headset microphone on for size."

Well right about then the head of the record label walked in
 With his assistant and his assistant and five guys from Marketing

...

They said, "This whole hillbilly thing, well it might have worked back in your day
 But the kids now, they need something a little more fancy.
 So, if you could just lose the yoddlle, and the drawl, and the whole Jesus thing,
 and the 'ya'lls.'
 By the way, Hank, how's your dancing?"

Well, by the time they were through
 Old Hank was in five thousand dollar boots
 And a sparkly muscle shirt
 With a mullet wig on his head

And they said, "Oh, one more thing.
 We're not big fans of the name.
 So from now on, you'll be known as...
 Hunk Wiley instead."

Well it didn't take long before Hank had seen enough
 And he said, "Man, this business is even shadier than it used to be.
 So if it's the same to ya'll, well I'll just be movin' on.
 'Cause I can see there's no place in Nashville for me."

...

The Musician's Motives - "Making it" vs. Enjoyment and Sociability

One last way in which the opposition to "mainstream-ness" and "commercialism" was articulated was in terms of a discussion of the motives of *local* musicians toward their own practice. Although members of the scene were highly engaged in making

themselves both recognized and commercially viable within a specific, small-scale “market” – of local participants, venues, events, labels, and so on, but also to a certain extent, of “indie” music generally – *too much* desire and effort to “make it,” to achieve recognition and commercial success, was often looked down upon, and many participants emphasized that their primary motives for playing and organizing music in the scene had to do with pleasure and, particularly, sociability.⁵² CB, for example, talked at some length in an interview about his distaste for musicians who “take themselves too seriously,” and whose ambitions for commercial success are too grand or conspicuous. He talked about how “refreshing” he felt it was to participate in a music scene where the emphasis was more on personal enjoyment, than on these other “external” motivators:

CB: You know, I joke with my friends. [Laughs.] You can’t play country in New York and take yourself too seriously. Because it’s like, what do you think is going to happen, really? You know, and I was sort of picking on my friends when the CMAs were in town, because of course everybody wants exposure, everybody booked a show. And we were all kind of like: “You think Brooks and Dunn are going to walk in and say, ‘Oh, this is just what the industry needs!’ ‘Drop everything!’” You know? “‘Stop the presses!’” Like...there’s not a real sense of, “Hey, I’m going to go be a star with this.” In the way that maybe people who are playing in, like, certain kinds of rock bands right now, or, electro-clash, or whatever they’re doing this year... And, to me that’s really refreshing, because I have played in more rock-type stuff in New York. And just the level of attitude, not so much from the players, but like, trying to play a club, and the people you have to deal with...

⁵² Indeed, I would suggest that the discourse of “alternativity” to or “independence” from the musical-cultural mainstream was an integral part of both creating this smaller-scale market, and making oneself viable within it. The frequency with which the position was articulated in forums intended to promote the scene (on band websites, in press interviews, etc.) was particularly clear evidence to this point. See, e.g., Ching (2008), Pecknold (2008) and Shank (1994) for further discussion of this tendency in “alternative” music cultures. The simultaneously expressed interest in Uncle Leon’s song, above, in rejecting commodification by the industry, and capitalizing on Hank William’s reappearance, perhaps points to this kind of ambivalent or contradictory treatment of commercialization within the scene as well.

KH: Because they have to sort of book...bands that are hot...

CB: I don't know, I guess it's a feeling that, it's their job... You know, [sarcastically] *New York rock 'n' rollers*. So they give you this attitude... And I think you meet the kind of person who thinks...they're going to get discovered playing the Continental or something, and that's going to be it. They're going to be the Strokes or the White Stripes or whatever. And that's fine, it's just...not my thing...

It reminds me of playing music in a little town in [a Midwestern state], where you play the local bar, and you hope a lot of people came. And if you really had your shit together, maybe you got a record out on your own, and went and traveled somewhere else and played. But there wasn't this sense of, like, "Hey, a guy from Sony's going to be here." Which in New York is a very real thing, because it's all here, you know? ...[S]o, it's refreshing to be around people who, I'd say, ninety percent of them are like: "Hey, we want to put on a good show. We can play this music we like." You know? There aren't a lot of outside reasons to do it, other than they like it.

Similarly, CS talked at length about how he preferred local music to "mainstream," commercial music such as Nashville country, largely because of its greater degree of "accessibility." He said that he saw local musicians as being more motivated by the desire to be sociable, and to personally connect with fans and other players, rather than to be a "rock star," seeking public recognition or success. And he, not insignificantly, tied this quality of accessibility to a "tradition" of humility and personal connections in "classic country" music:

KH: What is it about the current, Nashville stuff that you don't like?

CS: Well, I'm sure there's...probably some stuff that I should be listening to that I'm not because...it's so off my radar... But...I don't listen to the radio... I really listen mostly to local stuff. And I almost like it *better*, because the experience is a bit more- ...It's more enriching, you know? Although occasionally...you see people- Like, Charlie Louvin played a little over a year ago. And was just hanging out and talking to me. [Laughs.] And I was like, "Yeah!" You know? It was sweet!...

KH: That's great. I didn't realize that he played there.

CS: Yeah, yeah. And same thing with like...the old bluegrass. You know, it's like the whole idea of, like...those outdoor concerts, the festivals, and all that stuff...[where] the musicians are kind of wandering around. You know, they're fairly accessible. ...[B]efore the show, they're all hanging out...selling CDs, and whatever. Hocking the merchandise. But you can sit and yak with them too. And these are dudes that have done all kinds of crazy stuff, and they're happy to sit and talk to you. It's not like they're in the Green Room hiding from you or something. [KH: Right.] Even [when I went to see] Ralph [Stanley, he] came out [after the show] to sign stuff and talk, and, jibber jabber... [KH: Right.] That's kind of neat... I think [the "enriching" character of the local scene is] part of *that*...

KH: Being able to interact with people directly?

CS: ...Yeah. You know, it's...less of a rock star- ...I mean...I guess that...has always been a component in, like, early...classic country music. Where the star would be hanging out. Like Hank Williams used to hang out and sign autographs. Earnest Tubb would sit there and talk to everybody... It's kind of cool.

More broadly, those who organized shows or events within the scene often overtly prioritized sociability and loyalty to other friends in the scene over making themselves or their events more popular or more profitable. PT was a particularly vocal proponent of this approach (which was widely remarked upon, and appreciated by other participants). As the organizer of a monthly jam, for example, he took a very explicitly inclusive approach, setting terms for the event that made it highly accessible to musicians of all skill levels, and constantly encouraging new or inexperienced players to participate. And as the emcee of each monthly meeting of the event, he frequently made self-deprecating comments about its musical quality, and he constantly encouraged participation at all levels of skill and experience:

From my fieldnotes, 7/27/06 (all quotes are paraphrased):

Before starting, PT introduces the show by saying "Welcome to the [venue's monthly jam session] – the show that always ends just after you hoped it would!"

After playing Rock Around the Clock, PT says: “That was a very good example of what is the norm here, which is that nobody knows what’s going on.” PS replies: “I think that’s what you call an organized riot.”

PT then invites anyone to come sing a song... Says it “helps if you know the key,” but not necessary: “We’ll work with you. We want to be as inclusive as possible. If you feel nervous about singing on stage, you can sing from your seat...or from the bathroom.”

...

After playing “That’s All Right Mama,”⁵³ PT comes and sits next to me [and says] “Where’s your fiddle, skinny?” I smile and say “I’ll bring it eventually.” PT says: “If you’re no good, this is the place to play! No one can hear you anyway. That’s why I invented this!”

PT was also quite adamant and vocal about prioritizing loyalty and “fun” over commercial ambition in organizing shows. He talked to me on several occasions about his preference for booking bands who had asked him to play in their shows, or who were not demanding in terms of accommodations or remuneration. He also noted on a few occasions that he felt that there were differences in the way he approached organizing events within the scene, and the way some other participants did. At the annual Brooklyn Country Music Festival in 2008, for example, I was backstage with him between acts. He was planning to give out a set of plaques to some of the scene’s more prominent members – those who organized regular events, for example, or who showed up to them religiously – inducting them into the “Brooklyn Country Hall of Fame.” And he had asked for my help in presenting them at the end of the night (a gesture that I thought was a thoughtful expression of appreciation for my own interest and involvement in the scene). CS passed through the room to store some of his equipment, and PT quickly concealed the plaques that he had ordered, and the two began talking about the event, the turnout, and so on. PT

⁵³ This is the Arthur Crudup song, most famously performed/recorded by Elvis.

began telling CS about a conversation with HL, in which HL had offered to help expand the Festival in the next year. He had told PT that he thought he should make it into a bigger, higher-profile event by getting more substantial sponsorship, and bringing in some better-known, national acts. PT complained to CS that HL “didn’t get it,” and that his own purpose in organizing the event was to bring his friends together, and do something that was fun for the musicians and fans – not to gain recognition, or make money. PT was generally expressly opposed to taking on the role of “promoter” as such, despite his extensive efforts toward organizing and publicizing events. And he, indeed, often took pride in the poorly capitalized character of the local scene – bragging that the BCMF was, as noted earlier, “sponsored by homemade pie,” for example.

Classifying “Alternative” Practice

You got people laughing, people dancing
 People in funny hats
 Some in denim, some in leather
 Boerum Fort Park Heights poor-boy aristocrats

– Andy Friedman and the Other Failures.
 “Freddy’s Backroom,” *Weary Things* (2009).

This discourse about taste within the scene was broad, and dense, and there were a number of different types of identifications, values, and positions expressed. There were gender politics and identifications embedded within the discourse, for example, as some of my notes suggest. There were issues of race and nationalism engaged. There was also a relatively explicit critique of something like “capitalism” articulated. And there was certainly a more straightforward symbolic construction, or reinforcement of a social

community of players and fans going on. But I would argue that one of the central categories, and one of the central *concerns* being engaged here was that of class. This is in some ways a difficult point to make, because a language of “class,” as such, was infrequently used, and the social categories that were constructed within the discourse were not coterminous with those traditionally used in class theory. However, I think that an examination of the discourse bears this argument out.

On the one hand, as I noted in introducing this chapter, it is arguable that any discourse about “taste,” per se, is inherently concerned with class. As Bourdieu (1984) argues particularly compellingly, a discourse about “taste,” about “aesthetic,” “cultural,” and/or “lifestyle” preferences, and so on, is at a basic level always also an expression of the *capacity* to make such choices, of a certain “distance from necessity,” as he says, that makes available a set of options, and allows a certain amount of freedom to make these kinds of decisions and judgments. That is to say, more specifically, a discourse about “taste” is always also a kind of articulation of class “distinction,” of difference between oneself and those lacking this cultural knowledge and aesthetic capacity. I think this is a certainly a major component of the discourse in this case. It is also probably arguable, following Bourdieu further, that the broad set of tastes conveyed within the scene “expressed or betrayed” the class positioning of participants – that the tastes expressed within the scene, when examined in relation to the broader set of musical (and other) tastes expressed in...New York, the United States, “popular” music/culture...(the possibilities for relative “fields” here are probably infinite), convey the class positioning of their proponents. As Bourdieu says, “...[t]o the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social

hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class.’” (Bourdieu, 1984, 1-2) But I think that an examination of the specific tastes articulated, their particular components, framing and emphases, also reveals a more subtle and complex negotiation of class going on here. Specifically, I think there’s a distinctly ambivalent positioning articulated, whereby participants tended to express simultaneous alignment with and rejection of both sides of the class spectrum through this discourse – both the low and the high.

First, take the overarching emphasis on “classic,” or “traditional” country music (as well as the variety of broadly “vintage” musical and music-related tastes that were expressed within the scene). The music used here, the songs and musicians referenced, the language and imagery used, and so on, all clearly called up a kind of historical, rural, (mostly white) working-class social world. And this figure was broadly respected, and/or identified with – treated as a source of authenticity, “honesty,” or “truth,” as well as being a valued example of modesty and “accessibility.” The examples used above repeatedly reveal this construction: the “hillbilly” image of Hank William’s ghost in Uncle Leon’s song, who is nobly resistant to the music industry’s demands of “fanciness;” the “enriching” quality CS affords “classic country’s” “tradition” of humility and sociability between artists and fans; the broader valorization of older country styles as “raw,” “gritty,” and “real.” At the same time, though, participants were quite clear and adamant in their rejection of “mainstream,” or “mass” audiences and tastes, which I would suggest represented a kind of other, lower, class category. This group was configured as undiscerning and culturally ignorant, without sufficient cultural capital to “know better” than to consume the most widely available music, and culture. The “target audience” for

mainstream country music that JM describes, above, is clearly configured in this way, for example. And the consistent negative framing of “mainstream” country and other “commercial” music as “mass-produced” “garbage” or “dreck,” without artistic value or “creative” content, clearly had this implication as well. In an interview with RD, he made this point particularly starkly, explicitly framing the distinction in musical taste between alternative country and Nashville country as a social difference between two audiences: “educated...hipster types” and the “clueless minions.” The latter, he seemed to say, unthinkingly take up whatever music is broadcast on the radio, lacking the cultural knowledge to locate or appreciate “alternatives”:

RD: Well, to me, [“alternative country”] just means country played by people who aren’t, like, [into] that crap that comes out of Nashville. You know I mean, like, country played by...hipper people... [T]he choices that are made are a little bit more coming from people who are interested in refining what they’re doing.

Then, he goes on to say:

RD: Alt.country [is] alternative music. It’s an underground scene. It’s...something that’s...mostly [for] people who live in the city.... You know...it’s a demographic... I think it’s more, sort of...educated, hipster types...who listen to alt.country... [W]hen I was living in [a smaller city in the South], I really got turned on to how...it’s, like, your clueless minions are the people who like...the music that’s on country radio.

That is, in this discourse of prioritizing “classic” styles, and rejecting “mainstream” ones, there was an embedded simultaneous articulation of *both closeness and distance* to two different versions of lower class categories: a kind of “working-class,” “folk” category was identified with, and a “mass” category was strongly opposed.

In the discourse against “mainstream,” “commercial” music, participants *additionally* called up, and opposed, something like a “corporate” or “moneyed” class. This opposition was largely implicit within the discourse. But I think that the

“executives” that Uncle Leon’s song pokes fun of, the “industry” interlopers that AG describes as intervening in the “artistic” process, the negative depiction of record company executives CS uses in his rejection of mainstream country, for example, all point to such a construction. At the same time, though, participants in the scene also constructed, and prioritized something like a discerning, culturally knowledgeable social grouping – something like a “creative” class, or “knowledge” class. This social category was probably the most strongly identified with throughout the scene, and the construction is exemplified in many of the examples cited above. The broader value placed on, and claims to ownership of, “originality” and “innovative” or “creative” capacity could be argued to make this point strongly enough. But a number of more explicit claims were made in this regard as well. MB’s emphasis on the intelligence of scene participants (“We’re all really smart. Well read...”), as opposed to Nashville audiences clearly made this kind of social distinction. The claim is also evident in RD’s comments, above, referring to alt.country audiences as “educated,” “hip,” and (as opposed to the “minions”) “clued in.” AG similarly explicitly called out the “discerning” characteristic of the “crowd” he identified with the scene in an interview. And he specifically described this quality as being desirable in its social exclusivity:

AG: I think most of the people that I deal with are probably from a certain mindset, where there’s what’s on the radio, and then there’s what you like. And you always sort of question the mainstream. And there are a lot of other people that are like, “Hey I heard that song on the radio and I’m gonna go buy that CD.” And...it’s a very different crowd of people.

...It reminds me of being a teenager in the mid-eighties and discovering, like, punk rock, or bands like Black Flag and Dead Kennedys, and all these things that were...you just weren’t reading about them in magazines... You certainly weren’t seeing them on MTV. And it was very much, like, this big...underground secret still. You didn’t have your Nirvanas or your Greendays yet, to sort of blow everything up. It was still, like, you either knew what this stuff was or you didn’t.

And you would go somewhere, and there would...be this recognition... You'd see someone in a certain t-shirt, and you were like, "Oh...we have this thing in common that...nobody else knows about."

Here too, then, there is an ambivalent positioning articulated. By simultaneously rejecting something like a "corporate" or "moneyed" class, and identifying with something like a "creative" or "knowledge" class, participants also expressed both distance and closeness to social groupings at the *upper* end of the class spectrum. I would suggest that these two tendencies are likely symptomatic of the broad indeterminacy of "middle-class" identity. Without a secure notion of where "middle class-ness" is "located," subjects situated in intermediate positions are forced to *make* that location through a complex array of provisional, and in many ways contradictory stances, simultaneously identifying with and rejecting both high and low positionings in the attempt to both create symbolic space "in the middle," and effectively hedge their bets where class is concerned.

Chapter Four: Brooklyn Country

‘Country’ and ‘city’ are very powerful words, and this is not surprising when we remember how much they seem to stand for in the experience of human communities. In English, ‘country’ is both a nation and a part of a ‘land’; ‘the country’ can be the whole society or its rural area. In the long history of human settlements, this connection between the land from which directly or indirectly we all get our living and the achievements of human society has been deeply known. And one of these achievements has been the city: the capital, the large town, a distinctive form of civilization.

On the actual settlements, which in the real history have been astonishingly varied, powerful feelings have gathered and have been generalized. On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times.

– Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*

Williams’ (1971) exploration of the changing uses and meanings of “country” and “city” over several centuries of English literature, posed at each turn as closely tied to changing social and economic conditions in the region, remains compelling to the contemporary observer. In the literatures that emerged during the long process of enclosure in rural England, he notes, for example, a broad emphasis on loss: loss of a rural life most centrally, but with this, the loss of a past, personal and collective, of a moral existence, and “organic community,” of a connection to the “natural,” and so on – configurations that are often closely intertwined in Williams’ analysis. Conversely, he describes changes in literary configurations of “the city” in this era. He notes, on the one hand, a “celebration” of the city’s progress, its industry, achievements and order (especially as opposed to the country’s relative ignorance), and, on the other, a tendency

to fear its speed and diversity, to regard it as “volatile,” and dangerous. The outlines of the various configurations he draws out are recognizable in an array of contemporary contexts (indeed, the intersections with notions of “tradition” and “modernity,” “local” and “global,” “primitivity” and “civilization,” categories more commonly used in contemporary theory, are clear.). As he is eager to emphasize throughout the text, the salience of a country/city dichotomy, and some basic outlines for what each represents have been remarkably persistent over a great expanse of time. But, as he is always also quick to accentuate, a look at any individual iteration of these figures requires a look also at the unique history in which they’ve emerged, and the unique forms evoked:

Old England, the settlement, the rural virtues – all these, in fact, mean different things at different times, and quite different values are being brought to question. We shall need precise analysis of each kind of retrospect, as it comes. (Ibid.,12)

In this chapter, I look at the configurations and uses of the figures of “country” and “city” in the Brooklyn country scene, and, to a certain extent, in the larger social and cultural context in which the scene was situated. I start by discussing the ways in which each category was used and constructed generally in the music and music-related practices that were engaged by members of the scene. Looking at specific songs, performances, press and publicity materials, and interview texts, I outline some of the basic takes on these figures that were in evidence within the scene. Where figures of “country” and “city” were most interestingly engaged, however, was in the configuration and prioritization of Brooklyn as the symbolic and geographic center of the scene. I therefore spend the bulk of the chapter discussing this particular configuration. Here, I suggest, Brooklyn was framed as a kind of urban, but ruralized “alternative” to Manhattan, imbued with many of the positive characteristics canonically associated with

the “country.” Manhattan, on the other hand was assigned some of the more negative characteristics of the “city,” and was denigrated as such. I argue that this treatment represents another interesting expression of “alternativity” – in many ways analogous to that described in the last chapter. While here, again, the discourse is dense and there are a number of different categories and interests engaged, I suggest that participants articulated a certain ambivalent class positioning through these configurations that is consistent with the broader tendency to “play the middle” where class is concerned.

Before beginning, it is important to note that the larger tradition of country music has a long history of highlighting and playing with the country/city opposition. As Richard Peterson writes: “From the outset, country music was seen as a rustic alternative to urban modernity” (1997, 55). And indeed, the earliest marketing of the genre as such played on contemporary notions of the urban and rural, self-consciously crafting a body of work under the “Old Familiar,” “Hill and Range,” and, eventually “hillbilly” identities, always as against the dominantly urban commercial music market (Malone 2002). The early songs recorded in the genre clearly bore the mark of these themes. As Malone tells us:

The catalogue of country music is filled with songs extolling the farmer, and the whole scheme of rural values (from “The Farmer Is the Man,” to “Blackland Farmer,” to “Thank God I’m a Country Boy”), and with scores of others describing the innocent ruralite lost in the big city and at the mercy of the city slicker (the classic piece in this genre is “Stay in the Wagon Yard”). (Ibid., 7)

And this characteristic has been strongly maintained. The larger body of country music(s) is filled with examples that engage centrally with dominant meanings and associations of urban and rural space – whether recreating or challenging them (e.g., Malone 2002, Peterson 1997, Jensen 1998, Fox 2004a). The nostalgic tie to the rural

home as a place of innocence and virtue, the fear of the city's corrupting influence, even the obstinate, or "abject" pride in the cultural lowness of the rustic, all comprise central themes (Ibid.). Any engagement of country music, in this sense, involves an engagement of this history, and these themes and treatments. What I am investigating in this chapter are the particular configurations and uses present in the scene, and what they might say about the people involved in making (including re-making, reproducing, and receiving) them, and the particular social and cultural context in which they are situated.

Country in the City

The country/city dichotomy was highly present in the discourses in and surrounding the Brooklyn country scene. At a basic level, one of the primary narratives about the scene, both among participants, and in the media coverage that circulated during the time of my research, highlighted what was seen as an inherent contradiction in playing "country" music in New York City. The distinction was often posed as sharp – country music and New York each posed as a kind of quintessential representative of their respective sides of the divide. Uncle Leon's "Manifesto," cited in the last chapter, is worth briefly quoting again here:

New York City is about as un-country as you can get. Forget about any easy living or rocky tops or green, green grass of home. It just don't get any bigger, louder, or more obnoxious than here, folks.

Yet there's a growing bunch of us, right here in the middle of the world's largest city, who like nothing better than to pick up an old guitar (or a banjo, or a mandolin...) and bang out the sort of rugged, twangy music you'd expect to hear in some beery backroads honky-tonk fifty years ago. (Brooklyn Country)

A 2006 *New York Times* article draws a similarly dramatic distinction:

The one-day Brooklyn Country Music Festival kicks off on Sept. 9, which raises the inevitable question: There's a country music festival in Brooklyn? ...[I]t's not quite pedal-steel guitar country around here. When people think New York and music, they conjure jazz and punk, hip-hop and doo-wop, not Waylon and Willie and the boys. The city's last full strength radio station for torchbearers of twang, Country 103.5, skipped town 10 years ago, and the Country Music Association Awards, held at Madison Square Garden last November, were considered more exotic here than Vietnamese-Moldovan fusion cuisine. (The awards show is back in Nashville this fall, where it belongs.) (Kugel 2006)

The disjuncture was also highlighted in a range of band- or event names that explicitly juxtaposed the two categories, “countrify-ing” city names, or vice versa – usually in an ironic mode: the monthly “Kings County Opry” or the band names “Kings County Queens,” or “Citigrass,” for example (more on this in the next chapter).

More broadly though, the figures of country and city were often invoked in the Brooklyn scene in ways that were consistent with canonical treatments. Alex Battles’ song, “Queen of Ogallala,” for example, tells the story of a young rural beauty queen’s rise and fall in New York City. Here, the rural home of Ogallala is configured as safe and wholesome, and New York is framed as a place of aspiration and corruption – a “fine place to visit,” but a dangerous place to stay:

Alex Battles
 “Queen of Ogallala”
 Self-released single, 2009
 Copyright, Alex Battles⁵⁴

Casey was a princess
 Discovered at the mall
 From the Ogallala fashion show
 She followed New York's call

Casey and her mother
 Took a room near Times Square
 New York is a fine place to visit
 But don't leave your daughter there

⁵⁴ Lyrics were transcribed from the sound recording, and have been edited for length.

Take your daughter back to Nebraska
 Don't leave her in this town
 She's the Queen of Ogallala
 But the city will steal her crown

...

To the wolves that live on Wall Street
 She was just a one-night prize
 They crushed a flower of the prairie
 Now she sits at St. Patrick's and cries

...

“Casey” is lured by the city’s promise of wealth and social importance, but these enticements prove corrupting, and ultimately bring her down, out of innocence, but also into an even deeper anonymity: once “the Queen of Ogallala,” her “crown” is “stolen” by the city (and, specifically, and probably not unimportantly, the “wolves that live on Wall Street”).

The Doc Marshalls’ “Ticket Out of Texas” takes a similar approach to the concepts of country and city. It tells the story of a young musician eager to leave a provincial life in Texas for an unnamed “Northern town.” The protagonist’s Texas home is broadly configured as limiting and insignificant, filled with ignorant, unsophisticated people; and her destination is implied to be its opposite. Once she leaves, however, the country home is simultaneously remembered as warm and safe, and the city is framed as trying and cold – its advantages a drunken fantasy:

The Doc Marshalls
 “Ticket Out of Texas”
Honest for Once, 2008
 Copyright, Nicolas Beaudoin⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Lyrics quoted from the album’s liner notes, and have been edited for length.

Miles and miles of open highway
 Never looked so fine
 As when you set aside your little Lonestar state of mind
 Nowhere is bound to be here waiting for you to come back
 That row of bums can't wait to say, "I could of [*sic*] told you that"

The only thing worse than losing in a hurry
 Is knowing you'll end up back here
 That old six string was your ticket out of Texas
 But no one leaves her free and clear

I never knew the cold until I left your hills
 This awful Northern town wins any test of wills
 But barroom fantasy won't ever take you far
 'Cause whiskey eyes don't really see things as they are and now

...

In Yarn's song "Tennessee" the "city" is configured exclusively as a harsh and alienating place – the song's narrator never quite able to capture the "fortune and fame" he thought it offered. The (southern) country, conversely, is portrayed as accessible, welcoming – a place of respite, and new beginnings:

Yarn
 "Tennessee"
Yarn, 2007
 Copyright, Yarn⁵⁶

Oh, Tennessee
 You were callin' after me
 And I was right on time
 I was first in line, with the key

...

Oh, the North is where I lay
 For the first half of my life
 And now the South is what I crave
 Where I know I'll get it right, this time

⁵⁶ Lyrics were transcribed from the sound recording, and have been edited for length.

...

People askin' me
Where you goin'
And why you wanna leave
I say Tennessee

'Cause the city didn't hold what I was told
And the promises made always came too late
And the fortune and fame never found it's way to me
But maybe down in Tennessee

...

These kinds of treatments also showed up in conversations and interviews with participants in the scene. Here, the “country” was sometimes configured as a place of low cultural capital, characterized by ignorance, “backwardness” and lack of “class,” and the city was treated as the opposite. As noted in the last chapter, this was sometimes articulated in discussions of so-called “Nashville-“ or “mainstream” country music and the audiences associated with it, which were configured as culturally and politically ignorant. In a discussion of his upbringing in a Pacific Northwest college town, and his exposure to country music growing up, for example, GH told me that country was “around,” but that he had “hated” it. And he went on to describe the population that listened to it as having a “weird psychic connection” with the South – as sharing a kind of broader “redneck” habitus – primarily due to a shared rural identity:

GH: There’s a weird psychic connection between the South, which is, like, the home of country music...and the Pacific Northwest... I think it’s this tradition of people who...grow up in rural settings, and...work in, you know, a lot of agriculture, a lot of ranching and stuff like that... Not urban life. Which, I think...a lot of rock...and...funk and stuff like that, comes [from urban areas]... But country music, taken *literally* as it is- That’s why a lot of people in the Northwest identify with the South. ...I don’t know if you’d call it “redneck.” You know, they drive the same trucks, and fly the same rebel flags. They listen to

the same music. They watch the same Nascar. They vote for the same candidates. They listen to the same...radio stations.

As noted in the last chapter, RD makes a similar argument, but emphasizes the alternate side of this configuration, posing the city as a place of high cultural capital, a place of “educatedness,” and “hipness,” as opposed to the country, which he identifies with the “clueless minions” – undiscerning audiences who accept whatever “garbage” is broadcast over the radio:

RD: Alt.country [is] alternative music. It’s an underground scene. It’s like...it’s mostly [for] people who live in the city, I think. You know...it’s a demographic. ...I think it’s more sort of...educated, hipster types...who listen to alt.country. Really, when I was living in [a smaller city in the South], I...got turned on to how...it’s more your clueless minions are the people who like...the music that’s on country radio...

I kind of feel like [with] the alt.country thing, people are really into the details of it sounding like old country and stuff. But really...from my experience, way more of the sort of, real country people – people who live in trailer parks – they listen to what we call the garbage. You know, the country music that’s on mainstream radio. Because that actually gets broadcast... Because out in the middle of the country, that’s what everybody listens to.

At the same time, the country was sometimes configured by participants as a place of peace and simplicity, as an accessible, welcoming place, and so on. Likewise, the city was sometimes configured as frenetic, harsh and competitive. ST, for example, talked at length in our interview, and in a number of casual conversations, about his struggle to find his way in New York. He had moved to the City after college, and had tried to find work in the recording industry. He had trained for this career in college, but found it extremely difficult to find work in the field that paid well enough to allow him to support himself. He said that it was important to him – both for himself and for the sake of the girlfriend he had moved to the city with – to get a “square job,” and not hustle his way through shorter term freelance gigs or internships, the way he saw others doing in his

field. He talked about how difficult it was to get by financially in New York, and how he wanted move to the “country” eventually, to own house “where there’s trees,” and “have dogs.” Indeed, toward the end of my ethnographic engagement with the scene, ST did move away from New York. He said he was fed up with living in the City, and moved to a smaller city in the South for a slower-paced, simpler life.

As some of these examples indicate, treatments of country and city in the scene were often quite ambivalent. Configurations of the country as virtuous, peaceful and pure, in particular, were frequently interplayed with configurations of it as backward and ignorant. AC’s description of his personal history was particularly revealing in this regard. In discussing his upbringing and the development of his interest in country music, he emphasized a kind of “organic” tie to the music, through real biographical origins in a rural (and “blue collar”) environment, a family history of rural culture, and of “country” musics in particular. Indeed, he was quite emphatic about the rural isolation of these origins, their distance from the mainstream/known/urban-centric – narratively highlighting this distinction at length. And he clearly took pride in this aspect of his biography. But at the same time, AC articulated distance from that country identity/history by marking the rural aspect of this life/lifestyle as a *choice* – indeed a “fantasy” – on the part of his parents, whose own origins were more “city-based.” And he seemed to further distance himself and his family from the more negative associations with “country” life by stressing his parents’ “left-wing” politics, and “hippie” ethos:

AC: Well, let’s see, I’m from [a Midwestern state], and... I was born in [a large city in that state]. My parents were sort of city- Well, my dad was a sort of city person...blue collar city people, kind of. And...my...mom’s family was a little bit more in the country. But they were sort of [city]-based. And then they moved out, because my dad wanted to get out of the city. And he had this fantasy of living in the country and having a farm and stuff.

So we grew up...near [a small town]. Like when I tell people about where I grew up, I usually go down this list of sizes of towns. Like to most people I'll say...[one town name] because...you can find that on a map. And then if they're like "Oh yeah, of course, I know [the state]." I'll be like, "OK, [a smaller town name]?" [That town] is 20 miles from where we lived. [The larger town] is 40 miles from where we lived. I mean, because nobody's ever heard of the town. Like, if I said [an even smaller town], nobody's ever heard of it. Plus, even that's eight miles from where we lived.

So we were in the country on a farm. So I grew up on a dairy farm. And...my parents...in a way, are part of a hippie-ish thing. But...they probably have more in common with Mormons or something than they do with hippies, because they didn't party, and they really weren't any fun in the '60s sense of the word. I don't think they took advantage of the free love, or, you know. So it's kind of weird to say they were hippies, but...

KH: So in what way do you think they were associated with that-

AC: Well, just because they were sort of very left-wing. And my dad was an anti-war activist... [Pauses, and gestures toward the digital recorder.] There goes my- Any chance of a career in Nashville is completely gone for me now. I'll be out in the woods with the Dixie Chicks! [Smiles.]

KH: [Laughs.]

AC: Anyway, so I grew up on this farm... And I started listening to country music... Both my parents were sort of...anti- a lot of things. You know, we didn't have a TV or...in the beginning probably not even a radio... They were very restrictive about those kinds of things. So the only thing I heard when I was a little kid was country music, because my mom had bluegrass and country and folk records... Bluegrass was one of the big things she listened to... Johnny Cash was her favorite. But I listened to all that stuff: Buck Owens and George Jones and Jimmy Martin... And, like, Leadbelly. She was into blues somewhat too... So anyway...that was kind of the foundation of the Roots music thing...for me...

He went on to talk about a family tradition on his mother's side of singing, and passing on folks songs: "My uncle...was a guitar player, and he knew, like...a thousand folk songs. So...he would teach the family these folk songs. And then part of my mom's family culture on that side was all these folk songs. And we still sing those songs, like when we go back [home]."

In a similar vein, later in the interview AC also described a personal history of shifting allegiances to country and city, primarily expressed in his musical tastes, as his geographic locations changed. He elaborated on his early exposure to country music, but said that he had rejected any association with it during his later childhood and adolescent years: “I was really into that music until, maybe ten? Or seven or eight? I don’t really remember. But at some point, it just became important to be cool, and sort of be into whatever everybody else was into.” Once he finished high school, however, and moved away from home, and the rural setting – to [a large Midwestern city] and later New York – he said his tastes started to shift, and he grew increasingly interested in country music again:

AC: So I moved...to New York City... And I think...about then I was sort of like “[country] has just been calling me for years.” And I guess...alt.country was *just* sort of happening about that time... So that’s when I [said] “OK, I’m really going to do country music.” And it just seemed like an opportunity, because before then...it just seemed like country was Nashville country... You couldn’t really be cool and play it, you know?

AC later went on to talk about an *additional* turn in his musical interests that was tied to a subsequent four-year move to Nashville to try his hand at professional country songwriting. He had mentioned earlier in our conversations that he had started a new solo electronic (*non-country*) music project, and I asked him in our interview to tell me more about it. Here, he highlighted his experience of Nashville as being a less urban than New York, and thereby a more limiting, “culturally backward” environment. In this context he said he felt the need to distinguish himself by turning *away* from country music, and toward an array of European, experimental electronic musics – a strategy meant, he said, to prevent his being turned into a “suburban Nashville douchebag”:

AC: I started doing [my new electronic music project] when I was in Nashville. I just felt like I was kind of on another planet, you know? Because when I was down there...it was kind of like living in my home town again. It was like everybody around you is freaks, but you're the weirdo, because you're the only one of you... [T]he culture was so backwards, compared to New York City. So...having come from a small town, I didn't want to, like, lose my big city hipster cred or something, you know? [Laughs.] Which, now, I'd be happy to lose it. But at the time, I felt like I had come a long way from the farm or something. I don't know. So I sort of wanted to...reach out for some *culture* outside of, like, the Nashville- what I had around me. To feel like I had something to relate to. Or feel like I wouldn't completely be changed into a redneck or something... Or not a redneck, but more like a suburban Nashville douchebag, you know what I mean?

KH: [Laughs.]

AC: [Laughs.] And so...I'd do like web radio, and I found this European station, and...they play all kinds of really interesting music that sounds way more different- Like, I'm just really interested in music having sort of a progress towards *originality*. You know, like I heard a lot of stuff that I just never heard anything *like* it before... I don't even know if there's a word for it. People have called it folktronica...

Brooklyn Country

...[T]he rural/urban distinction signifies far more powerfully than physical appearances suggest; inhabitants of areas where town and country seem nearly indistinguishable may nevertheless elaborate a difference through extensive cultural discourse.

— Barbara Ching and Gerald Creed, *Knowing Your Place*

Where the figures of country and city were most interestingly engaged, though, was in the treatment of Brooklyn as the symbolic and geographical location for the scene. When I first asked my interlocutors in interviews and conversations about the scene's location in Brooklyn, the marking of various events and bands as tied to the borough, and so on, many simply framed Brooklyn as the kind of “organic” location for the scene – it

was where participants tended to live, and where a number of venues and events happened to be:

KH: It seems to me that there are a lot of things going on in Brooklyn, or [that are] about Brooklyn...

JM: Eh, Brooklyn's a good place to live. There's a lot of good bars there. And I would say, three of the four main country venues are in Brooklyn. [KH: Yeah.] Lily's, Freddy's, and, Hank's... And then there are... various second-tier places. The CasHank is in *fucking Brooklyn*. *Yeah!* Then there's Sunny's, which has kind of a bluegrass, fun, [indistinguishable] jam that's great. I don't know. It seems like all of us live out there...

Similarly, when I asked him about the reasons for or significance of the Brooklyn location, TM said:

TM: I don't know, when I first started looking at country, I found BrooklynCountry.com, you know? Leon's site. And that was- "Ok, it's not NYC Country." You know. [KH: Right.] Or "*Kings County Opry*." You know, not "Manhattan Opry." So those were the shows I was going to, those were the bars I was coming to...

When I pressed for further comment, people often turned to a discussion of the relative affordability of Brooklyn, as opposed to Manhattan. When I asked AG about the location of the scene in Brooklyn, he said:

I don't know, I think in general, if you were to break down people doing anything, whether it's art or music these days, you're going to find more of us in Brooklyn, just because that's where most of us can afford to live.

SL made a similar argument:

SL: I think there are a lot of artists who more- can afford to live in Brooklyn. And they can't live in the City. And there's more space to actually think. So, I think that has a lot to do with it.

Indeed, Brooklyn *was* where the majority of participants lived during the time of my research, and it was where the majority of venues and events took place. Housing

costs were also, in fact, generally lower in Brooklyn than Manhattan, and many people involved in the scene had, as a result, moved from one borough to the other during the course of their time in New York City. But there was a more complex set of meanings and associations made with each borough that both made Brooklyn the perceived first, best alternative to Manhattan, and that were a key part of the wider set of discourses about country and city, class and capital that circulated in the scene. In broad strokes, this discourse configured Brooklyn as a kind of urban, but ruralized space, imbued with many of the positive characteristics of the “country”: it was assigned pastoral attributes of verdancy and peace, it was framed as intimate, socially “accessible,” and community-oriented, and it was presented as representing, and possessing a certain individuality, and “authenticity” by virtue of these characteristics. Manhattan was often – though not always – framed as Brooklyn’s opposite here, and was configured, conversely as dirty and congested, impersonal, competitive, commercialized, and so on. Interestingly, like the configuration of “mainstream,” “commercial” music and culture described in the last chapter, Manhattan was framed here, at times, as both overrun with mass culture – most frequently captured in its characterization as a “tourist trap” – and as the domain of (unattainably) high class and high culture. In this sense, the class politics highlighted in the discourse on taste show up here again – in a slightly different form.

Not surprisingly, these configurations were articulated particularly frequently around the subject of, or in the practice of playing “country music” locally. When I asked TM about the scene’s tendency to emphasize its Brooklyn location, for example, he noted a particular incongruence in playing country music in Manhattan, whereas in Brooklyn he saw less of a conflict:

TM: I think if you said you were “Manhattan Country” instead of “Brooklyn Country,” it would sound like a rhinestone cowboy, you know... It would be as bad as it sounds.

Or, as SL said, even more explicitly in response to the same line of questioning:

SL: I think a lot of people in the rest of the country think that New Yorkers are, like, one way. A lot of people have never been here before, and they think it's this fast-paced city. [KH: Right.] ...A lot of people have no idea about Brooklyn, and how, kind of, rural it can be.

And there were a number of songs that configured Brooklyn as a kind of “country” location in various ways. Brooklyn references were sometimes incorporated into covers that participants did of classic country songs – adding a line about a local venue (Buttermilk, Hank’s Saloon) or site (Kings County, Atlantic Avenue), for example – in a way that (at least partially) framed the borough as the “country” location of the song. Other musicians/bands wove Brooklyn references into country formats or stories in their own songs. Rench’s song “Come Back to Brooklyn” is one particularly clear example in this regard. It uses a broad set of Brooklyn references in a song of lost love, making the borough into a kind of “country home” to which the narrator wishes his lover would return:

“Come Back to Brooklyn”

Rench

Life in Mean Season, 2006

Copyright, Rench Audio⁵⁷

...

When she left I didn't know what I was losing
That it would hurt so bad because she's not around
I played it cool but I was a fool not to stop her
When she bought that one way ticket out of town

⁵⁷ Lyrics were transcribed from the sound recording, and have been edited for length.

Come back to Brooklyn, Baby
 We'll finally get back to Coney Island...
 It's been too long since I saw you smiling...
 Prospect Park just ain't the same without you...
 I just can't stop thinking about you

...

Come back to Brooklyn, Baby
 I miss that old Kings County spirit...
 We'll chase down Mr. Softee when we hear it...
 At Tom's you'll get a slice of orange in line...
 And ease this lonely heart of mine

Come back to Brooklyn, Baby
 And we'll go out to Juniors for a cheesecake...
 I don't see no other way to end this heartache...
 Bay Ridge to Greenpoint, Red Hook to Crown Heights...
 Just come back and end these lonesome nights...

The Two Man Gentlemen Band's song "Newtown Creek," similarly frames a highly polluted waterway that runs between Brooklyn and Queens as a kind of pseudo-country river by referencing it in a song that roughly emulates a "traditional," gothic bluegrass song about a lover's suicide:

The Two Man Gentlemen Band
 "Newtown Creek"
Heavy Petting, 2007
 Copyright, The Two Man Gentlemen Band⁵⁸

...

It was in the autumn, three years now
 My love and I spoke wedding vows
 And when the evening air was warm
 We'd stroll that dirty shore

We'd count the tires, and paper cups
 And all the fish floating belly up
 She declared, "If you ever treat me mean,
 I'll throw my body in the Newtown Stream"

⁵⁸ Lyrics were transcribed from the sound recording, and have been edited for length.

So I hurl myself into the deep
 And hold my breath, until I fall asleep
 The only girl I ever wanted to keep
 Is lying at the bottom of Newtown Creek

...

I start in Brooklyn, swim to Queens
 Turn around and swim back again
 My bones ache, I can hardly speak
 When I'm swimming in Newtown Creek

Several songs also posed an explicit contrast *between* Brooklyn and Manhattan in these terms. The Citigrass song, “Brooklyn Bound,” provides an extended example of this framing. Here, Manhattan is configured as “the city,” and is imbued with many of the traditional meanings of that category. It is configured as a place of activity, high cultural capital, and social importance, but at the same time, of noise, crowdedness, and inaccessibility – as well as being a “tourist trap.” Brooklyn, alternatively, is configured as a place of relative peace, accessibility, and “grounded-ness.” Interestingly, the song frames the borough as slightly lower “status” – but then confirms its higher standing relative to the remaining three City boroughs, marking Queens as “suburban,” and tossing the Bronx and Staten Island out as options outright, with a pair of nonsensical lines.

“Brooklyn Bound”
 Citigrass
Serpent in the Grass, 2004
 Copyright, Borderline Music⁵⁹

I packed my bags and saddled up my gear
 Put on my boots and I'll walk on outta here
 I got no place to go but I sure as hell know
 That I gotta leave this city behind

⁵⁹ Lyrics are quoted from the album's liner notes, and have been edited for length.

I'd rather let my status drop a notch instead of losing my mind

...

I'm Brooklyn bound

There's no more room to move, no time to think

Can't comprehend what I spend just for a drink

...

...Manhattan's where it happens

... If you want the tourist trappings

... Go to Queens and chase your suburban dreams

... In the Bronx the bats are crackin'

... Staten Island's full of Statens

... But nobody seems to know what that means

Now I got me a brownstone in Park Slope⁶⁰

Only three Starbucks so there's still hope

...

Well the view's not as pretty, the commute's a little shitty

But who needs that big ol' city 'cause I finally got my feet on the ground

...

The M Shanghai String Band's song "Manhattan Lover" contrasts the two boroughs in similar terms. Here, Brooklyn is framed as separate from the central city – over the river, offering distant views of its "skyscrapers" – and, like the song above, is described in relatively pastoral terms, characterized by trees and cleaner air. Brooklyn is also framed here, in the context of the specific interpersonal conflict being described, as more accessible, down-to-earth, as compared to Manhattan's "stuck up" character. Each

⁶⁰ It is worth noting that the cost of a brownstone in Park Slope, at the time of this writing, could easily match or (perhaps far) exceed that of an apartment in Manhattan. I would suggest that the lyric here is more centrally referencing a recurring trope in public discourse in the City – "brownstone Brooklyn" – that more broadly contrasts the two boroughs in relatively "ruralized" and "urbanized" terms. "Brownstone Brooklyn," with its implications of relative "small-scale"-ness, "neighborliness," and "community," was particularly called up in arguments against "gentrification" and "development," as I'll discuss shortly. See Osman (2011) for a history of the development of this figure in the 1960s and 70s, and particularly a compelling argument for its distinctly middle-class politics.

time I heard this song performed live, there was a loudly enthusiastic response from audiences.

M Shanghai String Band
 “Manhattan Lover”
From the Air, 2007
 Copyright, Philippa Thompson, BMI⁶¹

Well I've had boyfriends from many different far away places
 And when they would visit me here in Brooklyn
 They would stick around for a while.
 But you, you just can't seem to wait to get back over that Manhattan Bridge
 Back to where the yellow cabs play.

Manhattan lover, you won't go out of your way
 You'll never come to Brooklyn
 And Brooklyn is where I want to stay.

I ain't that far...
 You have nothing to fear
 And those skyscrapers look so much prettier from here.
 Come on over, see the trees, spend some time and breathe in the air.
 But I ain't going to work three jobs just to pay your car fare.

Manhattan lover...
 I want to love you, but you live so [fucking] far away

...

Manhattan lover, you're a stuck up twit
 But I'm not budging either, so let's just end this [shit].

Finally, SugarPine's song, “Manhattan Special,” tells the story of a “cracker” narrator's affair with a high-class, demanding, and dangerously desirable “Manhattan” girl. The protagonist is mesmerized by her “clean lines” and finery, but ultimately

⁶¹ Lyrics are quoted from the album's liner notes, and have been edited for length. Language in brackets was observed only in live performances.

realizes her “light is much too bright,” and that he is better off on (Brooklyn’s) humbler, Manhattan Avenue⁶²:

SugarPine
 "Manhattan Special"
Ball Peen Hammer, 2006
 Copyright, SugarPine⁶³

She's all fine, I'm just a cracker
 Manhattan special, ain't nothin' like it
 She's all clean lines and bright shiny pearls
 When I'm with her, can't look at other girls

...

When she comes round, jump across the river
 Fight the rising tide for a chance to see her
 Knowing all the while you should cut and run
 When she's got you on the ropes, you know it sure is fun

Well then you get to thinkin'
 That light is much too bright
 And that, that will sustain you
 Won't find it boy it's true
 On Manhattan Avenue

...

Indeed, one of the primary modes of describing Brooklyn was as an accessible, personable, intimate place, especially relative to Manhattan, which was typically configured as highly competitive, impersonal, and alienating. One of the key places this discourse/framing showed up was in discussions about playing music in the two boroughs, and particularly about participants’ attempts to book shows in each. JM, for

⁶² New York City has two Manhattan Avenues. The reference to river crossing here indicates that the reference is that in Brooklyn’s Greenpoint neighborhood, rather than in Harlem.

⁶³ Lyrics were transcribed from the sound recording, and have been edited for length.

example, told me in an interview that beyond the more logistical factors of participants and venues being located in Brooklyn, one of the primary reasons for the scene's tendency to focus there was that participants didn't get as much "attitude," or arrogance in dealing with Brooklyn club owners as they did in Manhattan. Nor did they, he argued, encounter the distasteful "tourist mojo" in Brooklyn that he thought characterized some of the Manhattan venues. He went on to say that these characteristics of the Manhattan clubs directly conflicted with his and other scene members' approach, which was to completely eschew any commercial incentive, and simply garner as large an audience as possible to hear them play:

JM: [L]ook, there's another reason for this thing to happen in Brooklyn, which is that the clubs aren't *assholes* in Brooklyn. "Hey you want to bring people in my bar? You go ahead and do it." You know? ... "I'm not going to give you any money. Or, maybe I'll give you a little. But, you go ahead and do your thing, buddy." Whereas in Manhattan, it's just like: "Please bend over, now." You know? It's like: "Let me see how I can ruin this experience for you, *and* for the people who are coming to see you."

...For years...one of the main places, if you have an original country band, that you can play in Manhattan is the Baggot Inn.⁶⁴ [The] place is horrible! I mean, it's a great club. It's got great stage. They've got great equipment. They've got a sound guy on duty [to] do levels, whatever. And I've had nothing but shit gigs there. It's just like, you go in there, and the place just has this weird...tourist mojo, like: "Let's bring in the people from Bleeker Street to come hear our music." Like, it's all fucked up... And you go there and they give you like X percent of X – X + X so they can figure X, blah, blah.

KH: About the money you mean?

JM: Yeah, and you're like "How about we pay no cover, and we'll pay the sound guy and, let's get people into this show." That's the thing. All of us are always trying to be like "Whatever gets the most people in to hear me, I don't care." You know? ...I lose money on gigs all the time. I don't fucking make *any* money on this shit...

⁶⁴ The Baggot Inn closed in 2008.

CS, who had organized a number of the scene's recurring events, made a similar argument when I asked him about the placement of this scene in Brooklyn. He said that one of the primary reasons for the scene to be focused in the borough was that Brooklyn club owners tended to be much more "open" and inviting to bands interested in booking shows or events, even when they didn't know the band or their music. Manhattan owners/bookers, on the other hand, were quite exclusive, and solely driven by a band's ability to make money for the venue. He went on to elaborate on his experience at the Knitting Factory, a well-known multi-stage TriBeCa venue, where he found the booking agent was a kind of disconnected arbiter, with no relationship to the people working in the club, or the music being played there.⁶⁵ He said that he found this kind of alienated business-only relationship to be much more common within Manhattan venues. In Brooklyn, he said he had more personal interactions with those responsible for booking the shows, and they had a much closer relationship to the venues themselves:

KH: Did you guys...decide to do so many Brooklyn-focused things just because you were here, and you saw some other people doing stuff here, or-

CS: Well, two reasons, really. Obviously, because we live here, it makes things easier. But also, I got to say, the clubs, the bars [in Brooklyn] – at least at first, who knows what's going to happen now, but – they were pretty open to it. Like, "Oh, you guys want to do this? Alright... I don't, maybe, know this stuff...but...go for it." You know. So I think that had a lot to do with it... There was a place to do it. Because Manhattan [pshh]...they're like, "How many people can you draw? Well, I need to have a guarantee!" [Pounding on the table] "Can you draw fifty people? Sixty people? ... Otherwise, you can't play here." And [I'm] like, [in a quiet voice] "I- I just do this for a fucking- How the fuck do I know how many people are going to come tonight!"...

KH: [Laughs.] Like what kind of places?

⁶⁵ The Knitting Factory closed in 2009, but reopened shortly thereafter at another location in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

CS: *All* the places... Every one of them... [U]nfortunately, we...started the NYC Opry at the Knitting Factory. And it was a success there. It was really, really great. But the booker...just *dicked me around*... I said, “Look, you’ve got something here. I’m going to do it *every* month. You’ve got to give me a day... I will fill this place up for you. Make you money.” So I did the first one, great. Did the second one, great... But then she just *dicked me around*...

And so, you have a lot of that too... You know, some idiot booker who’s got *nothing* to do with the bar. Doesn’t even work there. Doesn’t even *show up* at the shows, for Christ’s sake. And they’re the ones that are the gatekeepers... You deal with that a lot more, I think, in Manhattan than you do in Brooklyn. [In] Brooklyn people actually [with mock amazement] maybe the *run* the bar. Maybe they actually *work* there. Who knows! [Laughs.]

In a similar vein, when I asked AG, who was at the time running a website listing local country bands and events, about why he chose to identify the site and scene with the label “Brooklyn Country,” and about another fan’s observation of a “rivalry” between Manhattan and Brooklyn, he talked about the relative ease of “connecting” with audiences in Brooklyn. He said that Manhattan audiences tended to be “reserved,” and “harder to win over,” and that as a performer, he always had to “cut through a certain amount of ice” when playing in the borough. He attributed this to a certain hip, competitiveness in Manhattan. In Brooklyn, however, he said that venues tended to be more “laid back,” and less discerning (accepting, for example, of a “sloppy, ‘everybody get drunk and dance’ kind of thing”). He attributed this partly to having more personal connections in Brooklyn, but more broadly drew this distinction on “cultural” lines:

AG: I think if I play a show in Manhattan, it’s going to feel different. It’s going to be much harder to win a crowd over. But then again, most of the places I play in Brooklyn are places like Hank’s, where...my name carries a tiny bit of weight... People know me... I guess it’s just going to be easier to connect with them. But, I don’t see any all-out rivalry. ...My bass player lives in Manhattan, you know, I don’t get into fights with him about it. [Smiles.]

KH: [Laughs.] I guess I don’t mean rivalry so much as a preference for Brooklyn...

AG: Yeah, I think you meet a lot of bands that live in Brooklyn, and I think that's probably, you know, economic necessity... You *are* just going to encounter a little bit more reserved-ness in people in Manhattan – at least, the people that are going to see music – because there's just so much going on. And for some reason, a bar in Brooklyn is just going to be a little bit more laid back. If you want to throw together some kind of, like...sloppy, “everybody get drunk and dance” kind of thing, it's just easier to do in Brooklyn, because you have to just cut through a certain bit of ice in Manhattan.

KH: What do you think that's [about]...?

AG: I don't know. I think it's kind of inherent to the culture...

On the one hand, these comments point to a real difference experienced in organizing and performing in shows and other events in each borough. Brooklyn was, for these participants, logistically more accessible: Manhattan venues were more demanding at the time of booking, they often had a more structured process for negotiating these deals. Particularly because these participants were largely new to playing live music in New York, these differences often made Manhattan practically less accessible. But I would suggest that there is a range of other meanings involved here. The arrogance, commercial focus, and “tourist mojo” JM perceived at the Baggot Inn, the “openness” CS identified with Brooklyn venues and the accessibility he perceived in its venue owners, and the “iciness,” or judgmental “culture” AG found in Manhattan audiences, all resonate with the broader construction I am highlighting here.

One final way in which Brooklyn was ruralized in the discourse was in treatments of the “gentrification” taking place in many of the Brooklyn neighborhoods in which my interlocutors lived, and practiced music. Broad discussion of the changes observed in these neighborhoods was quite common in the scene. And a frequent component of these conversations was the distasteful invasion of “luxury” condo buildings, brand-name

strollers, and other signs of “yuppification.” Indeed newly constructed buildings seemed to be constantly popping up across these neighborhoods, even after the housing bubble had burst and the economy began its downturn in late 2008. And a broader set of changes in many of the Brooklyn areas where participants lived and scene events took place were quite palpable during the period of my research: new businesses moved into many of them that catered to a wealthier clientele, existing buildings were remodeled and were sold or rented at higher prices, and so on.⁶⁶ This process of change came up in casual conversation, as with TM:

TM: I mean, my understanding of New York *before* I was ever here, maybe twenty years ago...was that Brooklyn was not somewhere you wanted to be walking around... And all of a sudden the rich kids who lived in SoHo couldn't afford to live in SoHo anymore, so they moved across to Williamsburg. And now Williamsburg is turning into BedStuy. Which, I have friends that won't *call* it BedStuy... And, you know, Park Slope, I don't know what it was a hundred years ago, or whatever, but...there's families here now.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Many have argued that the New York City, like other major U.S. urban areas (and indeed the nation and world more broadly), has been undergoing a process of neoliberalization since roughly the 1970s-80s, which has resulted in central city communities being increasingly dominated by high- and very-high income residents, and the businesses that cater to them, and in a broader polarization of residents in terms of wealth and geographic distribution by income level. See, for example, Booza, Cutsinger and Galster, 2006; Hackworth, 2007; Harrison and Bluestone, 1988; Morris, 2007. Booza, Cutsinger and Galster's study, in fact, places New York City *last* among all U.S. cities in its proportion of middle-income neighborhoods.

⁶⁷ TM clearly glosses over a complex history of neighborhood change here. It is interesting that his conflation of “the family” with a “gentrifying” population – with its implied higher class positioning and white racial identity – seems to be an assertion of the broader gentrification discourse he is otherwise critiquing here, wherein lower income communities of color are seen exclusively through the lens of their “poverty” (and the presumed social and moral deficiencies that got them there), without their *own* families, communities, and politics, etc. (See, e.g., Kelley 1997, Gregory 1998 for particularly compelling arguments against this dominant configuration.)

More commonly, though, “gentrification” was referenced in terms of a kind of insidious creeping-in of Manhattan’s people, tastes, characteristics, and values. Hogzilla’s song, “Gentrification of D.U.M.B.O.” articulates this framing particularly dramatically. Once a shipping and manufacturing district known as “Fulton Landing,” the Brooklyn neighborhood of D.U.M.B.O. (“Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass”) became known as an artists’ community in the 1970s and ‘80s. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, the neighborhood’s loft spaces began to be converted into high-priced condominiums, and a range of luxury businesses started to move in. Hogzilla’s song frames the neighborhood’s “gentrification” as an invasion of Manhattanites. A kind of combined love song to the location, and cautionary tale to its residents, the song’s narrator intones “Oh I love you so, but they don’t treat you right,” and advises “they’re coming to your party, and they’ll ruin your night.” These invaders are bringing their fast pace and their “crowds” into Brooklyn, and effectively “burning bridges between two towns”:

“Gentrification of D.U.M.B.O.”

Hogzilla

Lost My Mind, 2007

Copyright, Hilary Hawke⁶⁸

What you longing for, you never turn around
 For so many years, they never cared about
 Have you seen their faces staring at you from the crowd?
 One by one, four by four, moving in and kicking you out

...

Call it what you want, they don’t treat you right
 Oh I love you so, but they don’t treat you right
 Think they’re tired of the blame as they soak up this life?
 Think about what’s above as they drive into the night

⁶⁸ Lyrics were transcribed from the sound recording, and have been edited for length.

...

They're all here to let you know, you gotta move around, can't move that slow
Gotta pick it up, gotta go, you gotta move around, can't move that slow

...

What [are] you standing for, you're moving side to side
They're coming to your party, and they'll ruin your night
Hide behind your glass, too many people all around
Always burning bridges in between two towns

...

CS also noted this process later in one of the interviews cited above. Having mentioned that he was unsure whether the tendencies he saw in Manhattan venues would make their way into Brooklyn soon enough, he went on to elaborate:

KH: You said you don't know what's going to happen now. Have you experienced some changes in the Brooklyn venues?

CS: Well, you know, there's...that [place on] Fourth Avenue. Union Hall? ...That's new. I haven't been there yet, but that's sort of booking more upscale shows. And Freddy's is going down, of course, which is too bad... And there's Hanks, of course. But...it'll be interesting to see what happens. ...I think, you know, some people want to...come into Brooklyn, and think they can make it into a little Manhattan. ...Demand sixty people, or *else*. Or...make some horrible cover, and then skim almost all of it off. ...That kind of crap, you know. [KH: Right.]

Indeed, discussions of gentrification and neighborhood change within the scene often came up around the subject of some of the scene's venues. Hank's Saloon in Boerum Hill/Gowanus was one of the key sites in this regard.⁶⁹ Hanks was one of the few venues in the city where country music was a focus. It was the site for the recurring Kuntry Karaoke night, and Sean Kershaw's New Jack Ramblers band played a show

⁶⁹ The different neighborhood names here are themselves an indication of the changes in progress.

every Sunday night in the years in which I conducted fieldwork. Several members of the scene did stints as bartenders at the bar, and/or participated in booking bands or events there (usually while pursuing other professional or artistic endeavors). And it was more broadly a favored spot for both performance and socializing. The venue was appreciated for its investment in country music, and for the relative ease of booking, and playing shows there. It was also venerated (usually at least somewhat ironically) as a kind of authentic working-class “dive” bar – participants frequently reveled in its run-down state, and in some of the “characters” who frequented the bar as regulars, mostly apart from the music events going on there. Located on the corner of Third and Atlantic Avenues, the bar was said to have been favored – as “Dorey Tavern” – by Caughnawaga Indians who inhabited the neighborhood in the 1930s while working as ironworkers on various city landmarks.⁷⁰ And it indeed attracted a fairly broad array of patrons, from a demographic, and particularly a class perspective, especially in the earlier hours of the afternoon and evening. At the time of my research, the bar was also a visible remnant of an older iteration of the neighborhood. A one-story, run-down structure flamboyantly painted black with large orange and red flames, the bar was surrounded by an odd combination of similarly run-down shops and apartment buildings, institutional spaces, and an array of newly established up-scale businesses and residential developments. My interlocutors often talked about the threat of Hank’s sale for the development of condominiums during this time. And in 2007 there were rumors that such a sale was imminent. Ultimately, though several nearby lots were developed, Hank’s survived the boom intact.

⁷⁰ See, e.g., Cohen 2007.

Alex Battles' song, "Hank's Saloon" captured some of this discourse. The song anticipates the loss of the venue through a kind of pre-emptive nostalgia, framing it as both "wonderfully" decrepit, and a valued social space:

"Hank's Saloon"
 Alex Battles
 Self-released single
 Copyright, Alex Battles⁷¹

Hank's Saloon, Hank's Saloon
 Even though soon it may go "ka-boom"
 We'll down one more round, and croon one more tune
 For wonderful Hank's Saloon

Buy a beer, have no fear
 There's a fine restroom in the rear
 Can't write on the wall, there's no more room
 At wonderful Hank's Saloon

...

Let's retreat where good friends meet
 Pull out a barstool and take a seat
 Order a whiskey and howl at the moon
 At wonderful Hank's Saloon

...

When you're down, pal, don't frown
 Go where the ceiling is falling down
 Order a whiskey and howl at the moon
 At wonderful Hank's Saloon

...

Freddy's Bar and Backroom in Prospect Heights was even more frequently referenced in these discussions. On the corner of Dean and Sixth Avenue, the bar was located within the slated footprint of Bruce Ratner's highly controversial "Atlantic

⁷¹ Lyrics were transcribed from the sound recording, and have been edited for length.

Yards” development project which, from its introduction in 2003, was the subject bitter discord between developers, the City and community groups, and a protracted eminent domain battle that garnered a great deal of political and media attention. The development was to consist of office and retail space, rental and condominium housing, and, the focal point of the development, a new stadium for the New Jersey Nets. After several rounds of revisions, the project was ultimately slated to cover approximately 22 acres, a portion of which would have to be re-mapped, forcing residents from their homes, and closing numerous businesses, one of which was Freddy’s.⁷² The bar’s owner was active in fighting the development, and information detailing the injuries it threatened in the community was posted throughout the bar, and made available on its website, including links to activities of the major community group organized against the project, Develop Don’t Destroy Brooklyn.⁷³

Freddy’s was a well-loved venue within the scene. It was the location of one of its longest-standing regular events, the Kings County Opry, and was the original venue for the annual Brooklyn Country Music Festival. Most of the scene’s musicians had played at least a show or two at the venue, and a number of participants visited it

⁷² For basic context on the development, and controversy, see, e.g., *The New York Times*’ “Atlantic Yards (Brooklyn)” *Times Topics* page.

⁷³ The trope of “Brownstone Brooklyn,” referenced earlier, came up frequently in the opposition to the Atlantic Yards development. Residents throughout the Prospect Heights neighborhood, for example, posted signs in their windows bearing the phrase “I [heart] Brownstone Brooklyn” during the height of this controversy. Again, see Osman (2011) for a history of the development of this figure in the 1960s and 70s, and particularly a compelling argument for its distinctly middle-class politics.

frequently as a neighborhood bar.⁷⁴ Most people I spoke with on the topic of the bar's closing were sympathetic to the anti-development movement, at least as far as the venue was concerned. Andy Friedman's song, "Freddy's Backroom" provided an extended rumination on the subject. The song, which focuses on the bar's impending demise (while also referencing the projected fate of Hank's), simultaneously laments the anticipated loss of a rich social history, a familiar, personal space, and the "young and free" life the narrator used to occupy there. With the exception of the words "young and free," and a group chorus, which are sung, the song is spoken over acoustic rhythm guitar, electric lead guitar, electric bass, snare, harmonica, and pedal/lap steel guitar:

"Freddy's Backroom"
 Andy Friedman and the Other Failures
Weary Things, 2009
 Copyright, City Salvage Records⁷⁵

I took a walk down to Freddy's bar
 While my wife and kid were asleep
 I used to go there almost every night
 When I was young and free

...

⁷⁴ The venue hosted a range of other (often local, and usually amateur) artistic events as well, including visual art exhibits, film screenings, stand-up comedy and improv nights, readings, and music performances in a wide variety of genres, as well as a set of social "arts and craft" events, such as a knitting circle, and the recurring "Diorama Lodge," where patrons built dioramas on a given theme and competed for prizes. Cringe, a monthly event where participants read excerpts from their teenage diaries was also held at Freddy's. These kinds of activities were not uncommon in City bars at the time, and indeed some of the other venues frequented in the country scene hosted similar events. Over the years, Pete's Candy Store in Williamsburg, for example, had weekly Bingo nights, a spelling bee, and a "Stitch and Bitch" knitting circle. What was most notable to me about this range of activities was not only the current of nostalgia that ran through all of them, but the diversity of *objects* of that nostalgia: acoustic music, home-grown crafts, childhood games, and adolescent angst. "Pre-development" Brooklyn seemed to fit well into this larger narrative.

⁷⁵ Lyrics were transcribed from the sound recording, and have been edited for length.

Freddy's has a Backroom
 To play music in or to listen
 Buzzers on the walls beneath icing thick paint
 That dates back to prohibition

...

Donald runs the place
 And he gave me a shot on the way in the other night
 He always does and he always did
 That's what makes Freddy's feel right

...

You could be a sharp back-up singer
 Who smells like coconut
 Or an avant-guard Jersey jazz trio
 Who by day smells like Pizza Hut

Everything out of that Backroom
 Sounds like it's coming out of an old tube radio
 Either out by the curb, or by the kitchen sink
 And made to play what Freddy's got

My favorite record cover, or one of them anyway
 Is Jerry Jeff Walker, *It's a Good Night for Singing*⁷⁶
 The Backroom sort of reminds me of that cover

You got people laughing, people dancing
 People in funny hats
 Some in denim, some in leather
 Boerum Fort Park Heights poor boy aristocrats

...

...[W]hen I threw down that shot
 I started thinking about how Freddy's is gonna be a parking garage

⁷⁶ Associated with the "Outlaw Country" label, Jerry Jeff Walker is known as being an outsider, a kind of "alternative," to mainstream, commercial country himself. He was also, incidentally, a native of New York State, and did his earliest recording in New York City, before establishing himself in Austin. The album cover Andy cites here pictures a wood paneled bar room crowded with people drinking. The band is seated with the crowd, whose members are singing along with them.

Yep, someday soon, there'll be something in the space
 That occupies the bubbling fish tank
 Maybe a tail pipe
 Or a row of fluorescent lights

A Styrofoam cup

...

Some fast food trash
 Maybe a staircase or a bright yellow Mazda coup

...

They're gonna tear down Freddy's
 They're gonna tear down Hank's Saloon
 Like crickets under rocks
 We're all gonna hop to Bennigan's Backroom

...

The space Andy describes here bears the marks of its long existence (“icing thick paint that dates back to Prohibition”), and of the people that have been part of it (Donald, the crowds). He illustrates his personal connection to the bar, and the rich social (and musical) life that was tied to it. He describes a certain transformative quality of the space – the way it turns everyday people (“who by day smell like Pizza Hut”) into artists, and imbues their sound with a weighty nostalgia, perfectly matched to the space itself. And as the narrator ruminates on these qualities, he remembers their imminent end. Here, the song turns to a fantasy of what will replace the space, its social life, and its history – and every component articulated is markedly impersonal, inanimate, and ahistorical.

Freddy's is slated to become a “parking garage” here, and its known, estoteric objects are replaced with ubiquitous commercial trash.

Conclusions

Posing the rural/urban or “rustic”/“urbane” distinction as an axis of identity commonly glossed over in contemporary social and cultural theory, Barbara Ching and Gerald Creed argue that:

...[P]eople live the rural/urban distinction through mundane cultural activities such as their selection of music (country versus rap) and their choice of clothing (cowboy boots versus wing tips)—means through which identity is commonly expressed. Hank Williams fans and chic Parisians eating “peasant food” in three-star restaurants make statements about who they are and where they belong with these choices. Recreational hunters and avid gardeners sustain an identification with the countryside long after their addresses and incomes divorce these activities from economic necessity... Such choices shape identity in concert with less flexible markers of place such as regional accents and hometown origins. (Ching and Creed 1997, 3)

Their description here is interesting both because it highlights the ways in which meanings of country and city can overlap with class and racial meanings (particularly in their first two examples), and because it emphasizes the broader significance of this axis of meaning. Country and city, that is, do not just stand in for more salient categories of class and race. They represent a relatively independent semiotic terrain – one that, as Williams’s text extensively draws out, is centered around a relatively explicit grappling with the development, the relentless “forward march” of *capitalism* itself. This kind of grappling is surely a big component of the discourses outlined here in the Brooklyn Country scene. Present in much of the broader framing of the figures of “country” and “city,” this framing showed up particularly glaringly in the latter treatments of the borough’s gentrification, where “development” is framed as a kind of unstoppable force, consuming “local,” “authentic,” “community” space. In an interview, WF seemed to express a sense of loss about a much broader, national process in this regard when I asked

him about the widespread perception that there was an inherent “disconnect” to playing country music in New York City:

WF: [Y]eah, you know, it’s a little weird. But, it’s not that weird, because- Go out in fucking America now. It’s, like, shopping malls. It’s...that fake neon shit... That’s not even neon. It’s like...backlit, fucking, signs, like Bed Bath and Beyond, and shit. ...[Y]ou know, most of the places that were, like, the honky tonks where, like, George Jones played- That shit’s either gone or...turned into tourist traps. You know. So you might as well play it here.

But I think there is also a class politics being articulated here – and one that is in many ways analogous to that evidenced in the discourse on musical “taste” I described in the last chapter. Brooklyn is significantly framed in the examples described above as an “alternative” to Manhattan. Manhattan is configured – and indeed, *opposed* – as the “city” here in terms of being crowded, dirty, and fast-paced, but also, significantly, in term of being either 1) overrun with mass culture – a “tourist trap” as some of my examples above cite, or a location hopelessly polluted with commercial interests, chain restaurants, and so on, or 2) as so high capital (both in terms of the “real” and “cultural” varieties) as to be inaccessible or even hostile to scene participants. Its prices are too high, its venues too competitive, its audiences too judgmental, and so on. Brooklyn, conversely, is framed as down-to-earth, accessible, intimate, and (desirably) lower capital. And it is also configured, to a certain extent, as a more “creative” space, where artists and musicians tend to live and practice, for example, or where a more inventive habitus is reflected. Accordingly, I would suggest that some of the same pseudo-class categories show up here that were present in the discourse on musical taste – the “folk” and the “mass,” the “executive” and the “creative” – if in slightly different ways, and

with slightly different emphases. And there is a similar framing of each, a similarly ambivalent class politics, embedded here.

Chapter Five: Ironic and Sincere

Scholarly treatments of alternative country have typically highlighted irony as a key component of the genre. Aaron Fox (2005) suggests that alternative country operates under a broad, “constitutive” irony simply by virtue of the distance between the social/cultural world inhabited by those who tend to play and listen to it, and that which is evoked in and by the music itself. While acknowledging the ways in which alternative country musicians and audiences often “revere” the music, and “world,” they reference, he describes the genre in broad terms as a “problematic minstrelsy,” characterized by “[h]yper-modern, technologically sophisticated, well-capitalized, urban, cosmopolitan, well-educated deployments of archaic, low-tech, shoestring, rural, and ignorant images and expressive styles” (183). Assigning a greater degree of ironic intentionality, Peterson and Beal (2001) talk about the “comedic or satirical *tone*” they observe in many alt country bands (my emphasis). And Pamela Fox (2009) notes the genre’s tendency to treat the “country” it typically references with a “sardonic or parodic *pose*” (my emphasis again). Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox (2008) make a more particular claim, focused on the way in which irony is used in alternative country to negotiate the fraught issue of commercialization. They argue that within the genre, irony is a key tactic for both “recogniz[ing]” and “refusing” (“possibly outwitting”) the tendency, under “hyper-“ or “advanced capitalism,” toward a kind of omnivorous commodification (4). Under circumstances in which everything is susceptible to marketization (including attempts to evade or oppose it), they suggest, alternative country presents “an ironized conflict between commodification and authenticity,” which affords the practice a certain amount

of maneuverability to “persevere in looking for a way out of this market-bound impasse” (Ibid.). Indeed, Ching and Fox argue that this maneuver represents the genre’s “truly defining feature.”⁷⁷ Finally, Aaron Fox (2005) further suggests that much of alternative country is characterized by what he calls a “second-order” irony. He points out that “mainstream” country music is characterized by its own kind of “constitutive” irony: “[The] sort of theater of poverty [found in alternative country] is not unique to [the genre], and one could argue that mainstream country has frequently been characterized by a similarly constitutive ironic gaze at working-class, southern, rural identity. ... The interplay of respectful and disrespectful appropriations of signs of poverty and the injuries of class...in mainstream country is a complex topic in itself” (Ibid., 184). Fox suggests, then, that alternative country adds another layer of irony to this equation, which ultimately asserts “a new kind of authenticity” by virtue of its “self-consciousness” about the appropriation the genre involves.

In this chapter, I look in detail at the presence, and role, of irony in the Brooklyn country scene – particularly in terms of how it was used in the engagement with, and treatment of country music, and the broader social and cultural world referenced in and by it. After outlining three key levels on which I see this ironic treatment to take place, I go on to investigate the ways in which these approaches tended to be consistently interplayed with more “sincere” treatments of or attitudes toward the genre. I argue that a

⁷⁷ Though Ching and Fox each go on in this volume, as well as subsequent works, to write interesting and compelling analyses of individual alt.country texts (or at least alt.country-related texts – Ching’s primary analysis is of two films that utilize alt country music in their soundtracks), neither pursues this broad claim in more detail. Ching’s essay in this volume does, however, discuss the way in which the films she analyses prioritize the commodification of “authentic,” traditional county songs, styles and artists.

detailed look at these treatments (and at their simultaneous use) is revealing in terms of the class politics engaged in the scene. As seen in the last two chapters, there is a kind of ambivalent movement in class positioning in play here. Specifically, I suggest that by tacking between ironic distance from “country,” and sincere articulations of affinity for or closeness to it, participants “played the middle” here too, both making discursive space between high and low class/culture, and effectively positioning themselves within this space.

Before proceeding, I should note that irony is a difficult, and often problematic thing to write about, and describing and analyzing it from an ethnographic perspective brings a set of unique (and perhaps particularly pronounced) challenges. The potential perils of ethnographic representation – more specifically, the dangers of *misrepresentation* – are magnified in the analysis of this usually inexplicit, and often misleading discursive tactic. This danger is particularly immediate (though, I hope, ultimately productively so) in a project like mine, where my interlocutors may actually read, and disagree with, my interpretations. Linda Hutcheon (1995) suggests that irony “happens” within a complex set of relationships – between “ironist,” interpreter (who might also be the “maker” of irony), text, and context: “With irony, there are...dynamic and plural relations among the text or utterance (and its context), the so-called ironist, the interpreter, and the circumstances surrounding the discursive situation; it is these that mess up neat theories of irony that see the task of the interpreter simply as one of decoding or reconstructing some ‘real’ meaning...” (1995, 11). I find this formulation useful in thinking about my assignments of irony here. Specifically, the question of intentionality is not necessarily the central one (though I do make some suggestions of it,

where I think they are particularly motivated). Rather, where I discuss my interlocutors texts or performances as “ironic,” it is because I think that irony is *interpretable* (and so likely interpreted by others).

Playing “Country”: Irony in the Scene

I saw several layers of irony about the engagement with country music operating within the Brooklyn Country scene. At a basic level, there was a relatively subtle and unspoken, but pervasive kind of irony, akin to that which Aaron Fox notes above, that was present within the scene simply as a result of the real distance between the social and cultural world inhabited by participants and that referenced in and by the music they played or listened to. That is, the simple performance of and participation in “country” music in New York City created or implied a basic level of irony about that performance or participation. As opposed to engagements of the genre in, for example, rural, small-town, and/or working-class settings, where country music may be the dominant musical choice, where performers and audiences may have had a long history of participation, and where the lifeworld referenced in and by the music itself is relatively close to that of its fans (or at least their parents or grandparents), the engagement of country music in New York City was unavoidably marked as a relatively self-conscious *appropriation*. Even where the origins and personal histories of individual participants complicated this equation, the reality of the immediate context of performance – the stark juxtaposition inherent in country’s deployment in the City, by and for City residents – passively marked these engagements of country music as such. In his essay on “The Field of Cultural Production,” (1983) Bourdieu describes the “automatic effect of parody” that

occurs when an artistic work (particularly a “classic” one) is presented outside of its “original” context (31). In this vein, I would suggest that the engagement of country music in the context of New York City produced a kind of “automatic effect” of irony. The prevalent use of “*classic country*” songs, sounds, and styles amplified this disconnect, and as a result, this irony – putting into relief not only a geographic/class/cultural distance between participants and the music’s referents, but a temporal or historical distance as well.

There was a broader set of relatively subtle practices in and surrounding the music that contributed to, and furthered this type of irony as well. The mild use of “country” or “southern” accents, or old-timey stage names like “Dock” and “Uncle,” for example, had this effect. The informal incorporation of “country” dress – wearing cowboy hats or boots, overalls, or gingham dresses – also functioned in this way, as did the much broader array of expressions of “vintage” and old-timey tastes described in Chapter Three.

These latter examples begin to move into another kind of irony I observed about the engagement with “country,” which was perhaps slightly more intentional. Here, participants seemed to actively *accentuate* the disjuncture between their social/cultural world, and that referenced in and by the music. On a basic level, for example, as noted in Chapter Four, many of the scene’s band and event names marked this gap by juxtaposing signifiers of “country” and “city” (usually, specifically, New York or Brooklyn). Band names such as “The Cobble Hillbillies,” or “Citigrass,” for example, and event names like the “Kings County Opry,” or “Kings County Fair,” functioned in this way. The broader emphasis on the scene’s geographic location in Brooklyn, in various forms, and the naming and/or promotion of it as “Brooklyn Country,” when that occurred, pointed to

an emphasis, or prioritization of this disjuncture as well. That is, there was a basic framing of the scene, and of individual performances, bands, musicians, and so on, as presenting or playing not just “country music,” but “*Brooklyn* country music,” or country music in/of Brooklyn or New York, that more explicitly ironized the engagement with the (unqualified) “country.”

Participants accentuated this disconnection in a variety of other ways as well. One key mode was to insert markedly local, and/or contemporary references into songs played in more or less “country” or “classic country” styles. This practice was wide ranging, but a few examples mixed references in a particularly explicit way. Uncle Leon and the Alibi’s song, “In a Dairy Queen Parking Lot,” for example, used a western/cowboy ballad to tell a story about a near fight in a Dairy Queen parking lot while the band was on tour. The song begins largely a cappella, emulating the melody of Stan Jones’s “Ghost Riders in the Sky,” with spare electric guitar punctuating the end of each verse. The band kicks in at the chorus with a brisk brushed snare beat. And toward the end of the instrumental bridge, a vocalist imitates the instrumental motif of alternating fourths used throughout the score for the 1966 Sergio Leone film, *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (and much more broadly to reference the Western film genre – often in the spirit of parody). The incident is framed as a kind of trailside ambush, with the Dairy Queen described as an oasis to this band of weary travelers (i.e., this weary traveling band):

“In a Dairy Queen Parking Lot”
 Uncle Leon and the Alibis
Roller Derby Saved My Soul, 2007
 Copyright, Leon Chase⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Lyrics were transcribed from the sound recording, and have been edited for length.

The gun on his hip
 Hung heavy and real
 Gold and shimmering like the sunlight in his eyes
 The Dairy Queen loomed
 Like a bright crimson star
 On the bluest Kansas sky

The hat that he wore
 Made it painfully clear
 That he hunted for more than just game
 He said, "Haven't I seen your face somewhere before?"
 I said, "No sir," and backed away, singing:

"Start the van boys! Start the van boys!
 Pile in fast, shut the door!
 This guy's got a gun and he says I'm the one
 And I don't need to hear anymore."

We were five young men
 Traveling lonely and tired
 The last days of our tour were near
 That lone Dairy Queen
 Looked so inviting
 With its restrooms and cheap souvenirs

But I soon got much more
 Than I bargained for
 As I faced down this soldier of gold
 And the kids lined up with cones still in their hands
 Just to see a man gun me down cold

...

The title track on the Jack Grace Band's album, *The Martini Cowboy*, juxtaposes references in a similar way. A mid-tempo waltz, with lap steel playing solo over brushed snare, acoustic guitar, accordion and electric bass, the song recounts the exploits of Grace's alter ego, "the Martini Cowboy," a kind of city-dwelling outlaw, who, burned in love, "chooses the night":

“The Martini Cowboy”
 Jack Grace Band
The Martini Cowboy, 2006
 Copyright, Lonesome Entertainer Music, BMI⁷⁹

The Martini Cowboy was riding in a cab,
 past the horses in the stables in Central Park
 The sun was on the rise, so the day’d begun,
 but the night was long and the ladies were young

...

The city folk laughed, they said, “Where is your horse?”
 He said, “It’s up your ass, no it’s racing of course”,
 The martini so cold that the glass was all frost,
 The romance was strong, but it came at a cost

She said, “you know that I care for you so,
 but it never could work,
 don’t ask me why, it’s just something I know
 I think I’d better go home”

Another night, another chance, another song, another dance,
 another lady is swept in the field of his charms,
 She said, “you know I could fall for you, so I will implore to you,
 give me one more martini and I’ll simply adore you”

...

They dated for a while in a city folk style,
 with martinis and oysters and taxis and bars,
 But the romance wouldn’t last, it was all in the past,
 The Martini Cowboy had chosen the night.

...

The album more broadly is framed with sounds that pointedly set a city scene. Structured as if separated by “A” and “B” LP sides (arguably a kind of ironic/nostalgic framing in itself), the first, tenth, and last tracks feature recorded street and subway sounds – the latter two continuing with piano renditions of the song referenced above, entitled

⁷⁹ Lyrics are quoted from the album’s liner notes.

“Sapphire Martini” and “Sapphire Martini Coda.” The album’s cover art similarly plays up the contrast, with Grace featured in cowboy shirts and hats, animatedly drinking martinis in taxis, and on city street corners.⁸⁰

Finally, the Two Man Gentlemen Band exemplified this type of irony in a variety of ways as well. An upright bass and banjo duo (each also – ironically – occasionally played a kazoo), “The Gentlemen,” as they often referred to themselves, dressed in bow ties and vintage hats (bowlers, newsboys, fedoras, and so on) and played a fast-tempo, highly theatrical musical mixture they called “retro vaudevillian swing.” The band also accentuated their “old timey” character in playful songs about historical events or figures, usually from the same, roughly, early twentieth-century period their music referenced. The song “William Howard Taft” off their 2007 album, *Heavy Petting*, was one of several examples⁸¹:

Oh William Howard Taft
Had a great big smile and a great big laugh
Great big belly, great big thighs, that
Slapped together when he walked by

Measured in at a quarter ton
Made the Oval Office just fit for one
Oh you can’t squeeze nothin’ past
William Howard Taft

Oh William Howard Taft
Got himself stuck in a bath
Secret service and the police
Pry him out with a tub of grease

He had a state dinner for the King and Queen
But nobody got to eat a thing
‘Cause you can’t sneak nothing past

⁸⁰ See Appendix C for sample images.

⁸¹ Lyrics are unpublished, and were transcribed from the sound recording.

William Howard Taft

[Instrumental (largely kazoo) bridge]

...

The fact that the band took their old-timey, country references to such a heightened degree seemed to me to ironize them - accentuating the band's disconnection from them, and making clear that they were putting their audiences on. But their songs, and particularly their performance style also included pointed articulations of the gap. Like the Uncle Leon and Jack Grace songs described above, many TMGB songs mixed old-timey, country sounds and themes with local or contemporary references, for example. "Queens County" tells a story of lost love in a bluegrass style, and drawing on several pastoral tropes ("I was lying on an East River Bank with your head upon my knee"), but inserts jarring references to the urban environment ("watching garbage boats float by, sailing on to Tennessee"). Perhaps the most conspicuous way in which the band accentuated the "disconnect" between their own practice and context and the country referents in their musical performance was in their use of character breaks, or register shifts in performance. Banjo player Andy Bean led TMGB shows by performing in full character, using an old-timey/country accent, addressing the audience as "friends," and generally maintaining fictional personas for himself and his bandmate, who he called "The Councilman." At various points throughout the show, however, he would break with this character, speaking in his everyday voice and accent, and often giving commentary relevant to the immediate context of the performance. These breaks were often demarcated or punctuated by a strike of a triangle Bean kept suspended from his microphone stand.

In addition to the two types or layers of irony outlined above, there was a very explicit form in play within the scene, in which participants played up “country” themes, tropes, characters, characteristics, and so on, to the point of excess. This type of irony was most easily identified, and most easily understood as intentional on the part of participants, due to its exaggerated character, and its typical delivery with a degree of humor. Examples were numerous, and various, but they usually referenced more dominantly stigmatized rural, white, working class identities/figures/tropes: “rubes,” “rednecks,” and “white trash,” emphasizing ignorance, “bad politics,” and “bad taste.” There were many small-scale examples of this type of irony: performers wearing trucker hats on stage, for example, or bands selling beer koozies branded with their name. As discussed in Chapter Three, some participants also used intentionally misspelled stage or band names, such as “Perfessor,” and “Defibulators,” or used exaggerated southern/country accents in speech or song, or affects in performance (nodding, eyebrow raising, or arm swinging). But there were several more extended iterations of this type of irony as well.

“Redneck Roots,” a song by the band JD and the WWJDs (the name itself an ironic deployment of the acronym sometimes used by American evangelical Christians as shorthand for the phrase, “What would Jesus do?”) is a particularly clear example. The song tells the story of the narrator’s struggle to break free of his “redneck roots,” and hits almost all of the key elements of the stereotype: trailer park residency, incestuous

relationships, hard drinking, bad taste, conservative politics, misogyny, homophobia, and, of course, a love of country music (and the pedal steel sound in particular).⁸²

“Redneck Roots”
 JD and the WWJDs
 Self-released single, 2007
 Copyright, JD Duarte⁸³

Well I got my ass kicked in a trailer park
 By my girlfriend’s ex, I blame it on the dark
 I told everyone he was taller than 4’10”

Well I kissed my cousin, or, two or three
 These things will happen in large families
 My advice to you is, just don’t drink gin

Well I’ve been trying every day
 To shake these feelings of dismay
 I cut my hair; I buy Armani suits

But it creeps up now and then
 When I’m drinkin’ with my friends
 I just can’t shake my redneck roots

...

When I drink whisky I become a shitheel
 My best friend Gordon plays pedal steel
 Need I say more

See, I get pissed when guys say my sister looks nice
 And yeah, I voted for “Dubya” twice
 And in my closet there’s a pair of Justin boots

And I got a calendar with girls in thongs
 I know every goddamn David Allen Coe song
 I just can’t shake my redneck roots

Well Grandma says “yonder,” no matter how far away
 She just can’t accept that Uncle Earl is gay

⁸² The song interestingly, and probably not insignificantly, leaves out racism (or more specifically, white supremacy), which is typically a key association here.

⁸³ Lyrics are unpublished, and were transcribed from the sound recording.

She just tells folks he died in ‘Nam

...

The excessive quality of this “redneck” performance makes its irony clear enough. And when I talked to JD about this song in an interview, he confirmed that it was intended as such. After asking a few questions about his upbringing, and his family history – which he answered readily, but with some surprise at my interest – I asked whether he considered the song to be autobiographical at all. He answered quickly and resolutely that it wasn’t, explaining that he had extrapolated the song, at the urging of a band member, based on one of the few “country” experiences he had had, of getting into a fistfight in a trailer park:

JD: ...[M]y mom was a high school teacher, [and] then became a high school counselor. My dad worked for [a social services provider]... He moved up to where he was an expert [in the subject area in which he worked]. He wrote textbooks nationally for a while. ... He serves as an expert witness now – he’s retired... Both of them [were] psychology majors with Masters degrees, so you couldn’t [get anything by them]. [KH: Laughs.] You couldn’t outwit my parents, so, growing up, I didn’t get away with *shit*... This is not a lot that has to do with country music.

KH: Well, I’m interested in people’s larger lives, and, sort of, what brings them to the music, if anything... ...I was actually going to ask you [if you consider “Redneck Roots” to be autobiographical at all].

JD: [Smiles.] Not at *all*. In fact, I was really nervous to play it in front of my parents when they came out last year. And, yeah. I don’t have a sister. I don’t have an Uncle Earl... [W]hen I...was starting to write... I was talking to [one of my bandmates], and I said, “There’s nothing *country* about me. I’m from a big city. I never lived in the country...” And he said, “C’mon, there’s got to be something.” And I said, “I did get in a fistfight in a trailer park.” And he said, “Well, there’s a song in that.” So I took that line, and went from there.

He went on to say that a few elements of the song were autobiographical – he remembered “drinking beer and doing chew,” and said that his grandmother did indeed use the word “yonder.” Based on other conversations with JD, I also knew that he was

truly a big David Allen Coe fan (JD grew up with country music in his home, and his father was a fan of Coe, among other musicians in that era). But, as he indicates, the larger set of references in the song was included, basically, as parody.

In a similar vein, NW performed as a Minnie Pearl-inspired character at countless shows and events within the scene, some of which she organized herself. NW typically dressed in a frilly gingham dress and cowboy boots, and wore a straw hat that concealed a second, smaller hat that she revealed periodically in her performances to punctuate a joke, or introduction. As part of emceeing shows within the scene, she gave formal comedic performances, with planned “bits,” as well as improvised commentary and repartee with musicians and performers. She spoke in a thick southern accent, and her jokes all centered on the “country” theme – most based around stories about her own family and upbringing in the rural Midwest that had been fictionalized or extrapolated to varying degrees. She often joked that the home she grew up in had “four rooms and a *path*” (as opposed to a “bath”), for example. NW also sometimes incorporated humorous, and usually ironic contests in her routine. At a July 2006 “Hillbilly Hayride” show at Hanks Saloon, she held an audience raffle, in which she awarded such prizes as a photograph of Britney Spears, Kevin Federline and their children (who she called “the ultimate white trash family”) in a tractor-adorned frame, and a doormat featuring a photo of a dachshund in a cowboy costume. At the same event, she challenged audience members to come up with the best (by which she meant worst) country song title, suggesting such examples as “Drop Kick Me Jesus Through the Goal Posts of Life,” and

a previous winner, “My Teddy Bear’s Got More Heart Than You (And Less Back Hair).”⁸⁴

Finally, “whackabilly” band, The Defibulators provided probably the richest set of examples of this type of irony. Their music, performance techniques, promotional material, and surrounding practices were all marked at various points by exaggerated performances of “country” identities or themes. My fieldnotes from a March, 2006 show at the Galapagos Art Space in Williamsburg, Brooklyn provide a revealing introductory portrait.⁸⁵

The Flanks completed their set, and The Defibulators start to set up. “Bug,” their lead singer, who is wearing a denim vest and a handlebar mustache over his full beard, positions a ventriloquist dummy in a gingham suit on a stool at the front of the stage. EB steps up onto the platform in a vintage sundress and cowboy boots, followed by “Roadblock” in overalls, “Smitty” in a t-shirt and trucker hat, and “Metalbelly” in a red union suit with the rear flap sealed in silver duct tape.

To open the set, the group does a short a cappella introduction to their eponymous song “Defibulator,” which then transitions into a fast-paced shuffle, with electric guitar and fiddle solos, and banjo, upright bass and washboard providing rhythm. Toward the end of the instrumental bridge, the fiddle and guitar slow together to a sustained “flatline” tone, when Roadblock yells out “Clear!” and the band jumps back in with a refrain of the chorus “De-fi-iiii-bu-la-tor. Fix my baby’s heart. De-fi-iiiiiiii-bu-la-tor. Give it a good jump start!”

The staging of this performance was typical in their live shows. Each member wore, at one time or another, some level of “costume” that, as described above, played up the “country” theme to the point of excess.⁸⁶ Comedic elements were frequently inserted into

⁸⁴ The former is a real track from Bobby Bare’s 1976 album, *The Winner and Other Losers*. The latter is a fictional title.

⁸⁵ Galapagos moved in 2008 to a space in DUMBO.

⁸⁶ The band’s only female member, Erin “Bru” (full name Brueggemann) was the only exception to this. While she typically dressed in vintage clothes and cowboy boots, she never took this theme to the point of excess, as the band’s male members typically did.

the show – like short commentary by, or about, “Buddy,” the ventriloquist dummy noted above, who had pronounced buck teeth and a protruding lower lip,⁸⁷ and wore a gingham suit in the style of a country “rube” (more on Buddy later), or the exaggerated performance of their song, “Xmas Ornament,” which tells the story of a “mountain man” “satisfying” a bear (“unfettered by the fury and a furry derriere”), and then killing it in the height of passion: “now the bear was dead, nevermore to hug; but the man forever kept a beautiful bearskin rug.” The band’s performance style was moreover highly theatrical, with songs marked by dramatic entrances and exits, or the performative extension or heightening of lyrical themes, such as that used in the Defibulator song (described above). And, as noted, each member had a stage name that playfully pushed the “country” theme.

To match their name, the band’s van was a 1977 Dodge ambulance, that they affectionately call the “vanbulance.” They sold a coloring book, along with CDs, at their shows and on their website that featured portraits of the band members in rural scenes, surrounded by talking (and sometimes hard drinking) farm animals, as well as such childhood games as “match the instruments” to the band members, a maze entitled “Git to the Gig on Time,” and “the DEFiBULATORS ‘WERD-SERCH,”” which tasked the reader with finding words like “Bigrig,” “Honky,” “Bucktooth,” and “Whackabilly” (as well as “Agave” and “Piquant”). Dedicated to “the memory of Buck Owens,” the book

Likewise, her stage name lacked the comical, ironic aspect most of the other band members’ names had.

⁸⁷ The use of these kinds of physical characteristics to demarcate lower-class whiteness, along with the frequently attendant claims to entrenched “inbreeding” or incest (noted, e.g., in both Hardigan 1999 and Wray and Newitz 1997) seem to assign the class-race formation to an aberration of biology that reconfirms the “naturalness” of middle- or upper-class whiteness.

came with a small pack of crayons bearing the “Let’s Color” logo.⁸⁸ The band’s promotional material was indeed replete with overtly ironic elements, such as a straight-faced press photo staged in a room full of taxidermied animals, or a poster advertising their tour of the “Redneck Riviera,” with text positioned on what is styled to look like a Pabst Blue Ribbon beer can. Perhaps most over-the-top was an “infomercial” video the band produced, which featured Buddy Ebsen-Hackett, the hillbilly-styled ventriloquist dummy mentioned above, fireside.⁸⁹ In the style of a late night, low-budget TV commercial, he names off the tracks of the band’s 2009 album, *Corn Money*, along with a wide range of fictional titles, as they rapidly scroll up the screen in yellow text:

[Slow electric guitar and fiddle intro, close-up of fire in fireplace, panning out to show Buddy.]

BEH: Mm mm mm. That fire sounds good! You know what else sounds good? The new album by The Defibulators. It was stoked in the fires of freedom. It’s got songs on it. Songs that are sung by people, and played by people with musical instruments. How many songs are on this record? I can’t tell you, but their names I know by heart.

[Close up shot. Buddy is still the speaker.] “Buddy Ebsen-Hackett, what are the names of these songs that are on this record by The Defibulators?”

[Back to a wide shot.] Well, holy shit! Back off a bit, and I’ll tell you!

On this record, you can listen to [text starts scrolling up the screen]:

“Corn Money!”

⁸⁸ See Appendix D for images of the van, and coloring book. Illustrator James Jajac designed the coloring book, full images available at <http://jamesjajac.com/illustration.html>, accessed 1/6/11.

⁸⁹ See Appendix D for stills of the video, and a selection of other promotional materials referenced above. Video available at <http://vimeo.com/1878477> and <http://thedefibulators.com/videos/>, both accessed on 1/6/11. Buddy’s name is apparently a reference to both Buddy Ebsen, the actor who played Jed Clampett on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and Buddy Hackett, a Brooklyn-born comedian and actor best known for his work in the 1950s and 60s.

“Holy Roler”

“Ol’ Winchester”

“The Gravy Shake”

...

[Here the titles become fictional:]

“I Drank Scotch, Now I’m About to Kill You”

...

“Proposition 221 (Red State, Brown Blood)”

...

“Let’s Eat Our Unborn Baby”

...

“Shit, I Shot Someone Holy”

...

“The Bitch Ate My Lettuce”

“Woke Up With A Possum”

“and a couple more hits...”

Buddy then advises the audience to “hear it for themselves,” as the screen flashes credit card logos and the text “Buy it Now!” and Buddy signs off:

Buddy Ebsen-Hackett. Keep it plastic! [Laughs.] Keeping it plastic! You heard? Keeping it plas-tic...baby! Don’t shoot nobody now!

This video, and the broader set of Defibulators’ materials clearly ironize the performance of “country” and “country” roles/identities by playing up their more

dominantly denigrated characteristics in the same way JD and NW do, above. The references to heavy drinking, foolish belligerence, racist politics, as well as a general ignorance and low-brow tastes, all foreground the genre's most negative associations, and thereby assert both a knowledge of, and distance from them. That is, they represent a clear articulation of "distinction," in Bourdieu's sense, and carve out a kind of safe space for the Defibulators themselves within the broader musical (and social/cultural) landscape.

These overtly ironic performances – these excessive instances of "playing country" – were overall the most explicit way in which participants in the scene both called attention to country music's widespread identification as, and with, "trash," and distanced themselves from that identification. As discussed in Chapter Three, in explicit conversations about taste, participants usually quickly broadened their criticisms of "Nashville" country to make a broader critique of "mainstream" and/or "commercial" music and culture generally. Here, however, the critique is focused, if not quite direct, and the message is clear: "this is not *that* kind of country."

Playing Country: Sincerity in the Scene

These ironic approaches to playing country were, however, almost always interplayed with opposing "sincere" ones. Indeed, most participants tacked closely between, or sometimes mixed, these treatments, such that any ironic, or sincere performance was rarely comprehensible solely as such. I would now like to turn to outlining some of the predominant modes of sincerity in the scene. These approaches

complicated the distance from country music and its social/cultural referents that was articulated through the ironic treatments outlined above.

One of the primary ways in which a more sincere approach took shape was in a reverent treatment of the country music participants were interested in. As discussed in Chapter Three, participants in the scene generally expressed a strong appreciation of “classic” country artists, sounds, and styles in particular. Many talked explicitly in interviews and informal conversations about their respect for these “classic” musicians, and the music they made, describing them as their “heroes,” for example, and talking about their music as highly artistically valued, or as “raw,” “real,” and so on. Respect for traditional country was expressed in a wide variety of less explicit ways as well.

Musicians covered classic country songs in performances and on their albums, with a serious, respectful approach – typically in an attitude of tribute to the older musicians, and to the broader “classic” country genre, and/or the historical socio-cultural world it referenced. As noted, participants often arranged explicit “tribute” shows to some of these artists. Musicians and fans also often took the task of learning about and mastering these classic styles quite seriously – dedicating a large amount of time and effort to collecting and listening to recordings, reading about the genre’s history, and developing the musical skill to play it. And more broadly, participants often played their own music in a “classic country” style with an attitude of sincerity and respect.

Indeed, many of the participants whose ironic approaches are highlighted above also incorporated this kind of reverent approach. Though performing her stage persona with a high level of irony, for example, NW also considered the act to be an homage to the tradition of the “hillbilly” comedian/enne. She often talked with pride about having

met and conferred with Minnie Pearl about her act. And she researched the history of barn dance shows, and of comedic “rube” characters like hers fairly extensively. At a July 2006 New York City Opry show, she spoke to me about research she was doing in this regard. It was notable to me in this exchange that NW’s register shifted from the casual tone, delivered in a thick country accent, that she used in both performing, and to a significant extent in interacting socially with fans at her shows, to a serious tone in which the accent was almost completely absent:

[NW] came over and sat next to me and told me she’s been doing research on Louisiana Hayride-type shows. She said she found the “Big D. Jamboree” [a 1950s/60s-era live radio show] in Dallas, and discovered that the guy who led/organized(?) it is now releasing a recording. She said she found [former country singer] Helen Hall through this research. I noticed a register shift [when she started talking about this research] – from casual jokey talk with [a southern/country] accent, etc., to serious talk without it. I’m interested in her studious approach. She said she called Helen Hall and asked her about the history of this show, asked for tapes, etc. She also said that she’s starting to write her own songs – that [another musician] had encouraged her. She said she couldn’t remember feeling so artistically inspired since moving to San Francisco and getting involved in improvisational theater. She seemed very excited...

Likewise, JD and the Defibulators highlighted their respect for a range of country artists they felt inspired their own music. JD talked at length about his love for Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and particularly, David Allen Coe. And various members of the Defibulators highlighted their respect for their country heroes – George Jones, Buck Owens, and Johnny Cash, among others.

Another type of sincere or earnest approach that was taken was a kind of celebration of country music as “accessible,” “social,” and “fun.” As I also noted in Chapter Three, participants often emphasized that they felt that country music was a highly “inclusive” and “social” genre of music, wherein a large amount of skill or experience were not needed, and competitiveness was generally eschewed.

In this vein, several participants talked specifically about being interested in country because it was more “fun,” or made them more “happy” than the more rock-influenced genres they were otherwise engaged with, or surrounded by in New York, which they perceived as more competitive and alienating.

RD, for example, talked in an interview about his turn to playing country music. After trying for several years to play in a wide variety of different bands, and playing in a somewhat high-profile rock band in New York, he said he grew disillusioned with his progress, and with the broader “business” of music:

RD: Probably around '96...I just wanted to quit music... You know, I mean I think I had just...tried really hard, and...failed. And I guess I also...realized that the business was...not really for me... You know, it's a business that's for people that are good at being opportunists, I think. And that's...not my personality. You know, I'm more of a worker bee... And then I think I just decided, like: “What do I like to do, just for fun?”... You know all these years, I'd been playing the country licks for fun. Just kind of a guilty pleasure...[smiling] wouldn't want to let these guys in this cool rock band know that I was sitting home playing country licks, or whatever. And then I was like, yeah, you know, that's what I would do just for fun... So then I...decided to put together a country band.

Similarly, JH, who hosted a local “classic country” radio show, and had taken a quite studious and reverent approach of her own to the genre through that process, also talked in an interview about feeling that the Brooklyn Country scene made her “happier” than the indie rock scene in which she had until recently been heavily involved. She said that this was because of the “sense of love” she found in it. And she talked about having strayed from the local indie rock scene, as exemplified by her ignorance of the bands booked to play at the Williamsburg/Greenpoint venue, McCarren Pool that summer.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ McCarren Pool was a public swimming pool that was not in use, and had been converted into a performance space – as well as an often-touted Brooklyn hipster hangout.

She explained this by saying that she now found the indie scene to be a “downer” for its emphasis on more critical, and cool, disinvested participation:

JH: Well, one thing I’ve found is that since being involved in country music here, I find that far more exciting and valuable than...following, sort of, new indie rock or new, New York music... There’s just more of a sense of, like, love and everything around all of this that...really just makes me a lot happier. Whereas, you know, going to shows in New York generally, it’s...a *downer*. I mean, no one wants to dance, and no one wants to...be happy, and everyone nods their head, and, blah, blah... [S]o, I’ve really lost touch with that. I mean, just recently...they [published] who’s playing McCarren Park Pool this summer... I looked at it, and there were like...fifteen bands listed. And...I’d heard of four of them. Which...three years ago would *not* have been the case. I would have known all of them... So I’ve found that I’ve really drifted away from that...

Finally, PT talked at length in an interview about his objectives for organizing a jam session for the scene. When I asked him about the event’s design, and some of the parameters he had set up for it, he said that his rationale was to make the jam “accessible” and encourage people to participate, because the primary objective was just to have fun. He particularly opposed this approach to that taken at other jams in the city, where instrumental virtuosity, or encyclopedic musical knowledge were more emphasized, and the tenor tended to be more competitive/evaluative:

PT: I try not to hold too hard and fast to [the rules I set]. It’s just that I...wanted to play songs that people can stay with, you know? ...And I want it to be songs that are popular enough...so that anybody who walks in with a guitar...can...sit down and go: “Oh, I *kinda* know this song. I’ve heard it...” And also for the crowd, I want the crowd to sing along and...get into it and have fun... [So] that’s why... It’s...to kind of really lower the bar.

And I did it because I went to other jams where...they play these things called fiddle tunes? You ever play a fiddle tune?

KH: I’m not that good at fiddle actually, [laughs]...

PT: They’re tough, you know?... Even if you’re playing guitar on a fiddle tune...[it’s] like “Dl dl do do do do grlll lrl- What the hell?! I can’t do this!! How long have you guys been practicing?!” [KH: Laughs.] So I wanted to do

something for people who weren't good, but wanted to have fun! Not like we're all dorky...not that we all suck. Just, like, you don't have to be great or have no job and just...practice your guitar to have fun playing music, and make people happy. Or to *listen* to music and make people happy. If the music is simple, people can join in... And there's a certain need for it in New York... There's not enough places...where you can just sit around and belt out country and get drunk...

As noted in Chapter Three, PT was known for his emphasis on inclusivity throughout the scene. And he overtly eschewed popularity, and marketability over loyalty and sociability in organizing shows and events. Interestingly, earlier in the above interview, PT explicitly opposed his approach to the hip and often highly ironic approach used by contemporary indie rock bands. When we talked about the generally modest aspirations of his and other bands within the scene, he said:

[T]here aren't that many people [in the Brooklyn Country scene] who have gimics... We saw a fucking band at Northsix, they walked onto stage in slow motion. And I wanted to fucking smack them upside the head, you know? They're *popular* now! [KH: What band was that?] Of Montreal? People like them! I wanted to *fucking* kill them. There were two people in the band who could play, and you could tell the rest of [them were] just like: "What a funny joke that we're in this band!"

This kind of approach that framed the engagement with country music as a way to emphasize "inclusivity" and "fun" was exemplified in performance in a variety of ways as well. Participants clearly did really enjoy playing, and participating in the music. This was particularly notable among audiences, who often freely danced, and smiled and openly had a good time.⁹¹ And even where they employed irony, or even derisiveness, there was usually an element of this sincere enjoyment as well.

⁹¹ This was, as JH noted above, a particularly distinct departure from the standard modes of participation at indie rock shows in the City, where audience members tended to stand, largely motionless, straight-faced and apart, and consider the performance happening on stage. This characteristic of the Brooklyn Country scene was also challenging for me

A final way in which participants took a “sincere” approach to their country music practice was to treat it seriously as *artistic* practice. Particularly with regard to original compositions, participants performed and talked about their music with a serious affect. As discussed in Chapter Three, most regarded the composition of original, new music as extremely important to the value of their musical practice. And they took this practice seriously in discussion and performance. SL, for example, was very serious about playing country music, as an artistic pursuit. She was trying to make a career for herself in music, and started her own record company in the time that I was involved in the scene, in that interest. She had carefully auditioned her band members, had high standards for their proficiency (and often bragged about their qualifications), and led a rigorous rehearsal schedule. She also took her own song writing quite seriously. She outlined some of her approach in this regard in an interview:

I want it perfect. I want to be able to sing, and know exactly what’s happening behind me. And I think any good [musician]- Like, Patsy Cline was like: [making the sound of a whip] “whop-psh”...with her backing band. And Dolly’s the same way. I mean, she has a bandleader. And...Patty Griffith has a bandleader who does her whole band... My band is not going to crap out on me. There’s nothing worse than being up there and having that happen... I’m trying to step it up. And, like, actually be someone that...[people] talk about. Or, something new is happening at every show. You know? And it’s tight... I don’t like slop.

Similarly, despite the high level of irony present in their work, the Defibulators also tended to treat their songwriting, and performance as part of a serious artistic pursuit.

from a research perspective, both because the mode of participation was less familiar to me, and because I often felt I needed to take a more thoughtful, serious stance toward what was happening at scene events – observing, taking notes, etc. And there were sometimes moments of subtle conflict in this regard with my interlocutors, where they would try break that participatory distance and encourage me to drink more, or to come out onto the dance floor – invitations that I usually indulged in order to maintain good rapport (and to avoid dampening the general merriment).

This was evident in their affect in performing some of their songs. But it was also something they explicitly emphasized in various ways in both their promotional materials, and in conversation.

Discussion:

...[T]hrough the economic and social conditions which they presuppose, the different ways of relating to realities and fictions, of believing in fictions and the realities they simulate, with more or less distance and detachment, are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and, consequently, bound up with the systems of dispositions (*habitus*) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions.

– Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*

Aaron Fox (2005) argues that mainstream country's irony expresses a lived and invested sense of loss, and increasing marginalization on the part of its predominantly "working class and rural or small town" proponents, particularly in the face of broad historical changes to the "canonical site of working class experience" (184). Alternative country's irony on the other hand, he suggests, primarily expresses something akin to what Bourdieu calls "distinction" – both in the indirect sense of articulating a "freedom to choose" among a variety of different aesthetic/cultural options, and the direct sense of separation from the traditionally lower class audience for country music.

There is clearly a performance of distance in the ironic approaches outlined above, and I would suggest that the primary distance being articulated is one of class, though there are other boundaries being made as well. On the one hand, I would argue that there's a certain inherent class politics to irony, wherein the ironist is not only displaying his or her discursive skill – which is to say, to a significant degree, his or her

cultural capital – but is also challenging the audience’s ability to discern the intended meaning. Additionally, as Linda Hutcheon observes, whereas “the analysis of irony is usually complex and laborious...the practice of it appears deft and graceful” (1995, 7). In this sense, the tactic solidly places the ironist in a position of “ease,” especially relative to the audience, who is required to interpretively “labor” to catch up. More specifically, though, irony is a powerful method of articulating distance – and in the example of the Brooklyn Country scene, the distance is clearly between some version of the social and cultural world of “the country” and that which participants currently inhabit.

In the more “sincere” approaches I outlined, I would argue, there is also some expression of distance. In the “reverent” approach, this is particularly in play: participants, to some extent, made country music into a kind of authentic folk object to be collected, polished, and admired at arm’s length – a position that, in addition to expressing respect for the admired object, articulates the collector’s *ability* to make that practice or expression into an object, his or her access to, and mastery of the variety of cultural options (which is to say, the cultural capital) available. There is also some articulation of distance present in the “serious music”/“artistic” approach. By aestheticizing this music that is typically framed as “ordinary” (even if this framing is often a fiction created by its “original” performers/promoters), participants articulated a kind of detachment – or capacity for detachment, i.e., “ease” – from it, and the social/cultural world referenced in and by it, similar to that described above. As Bourdieu writes:

...[T]he aesthete, who, as is seen whenever he appropriates one of the objects of popular taste (e.g., Westerns or strip cartoons), introduces a distance, a gap—the measure of his distant distinction—vis-à-vis ‘first-degree’ perception, by displacing the interest from the ‘content’, characters, plot etc., to the form, to the

specifically artistic effects which are only appreciated relationally, through a comparison with other works which is incompatible with immersion in the singularity of the work immediately given. Detachment, disinterestedness, indifference—aesthetic theory has so often presented these as the only way to recognize the work of art for what it is, autonomous, *selbständig*, that one ends up forgetting that they really mean disinvestment, detachment, indifference, in other words, the refusal to invest oneself and take things seriously. (Bourdieu 1984, 34)

But I think there's also some expression of closeness to "country" and the social and cultural world it references in these approaches as well. Even if partial, the admiration and respect is there. And participants are making real "effort," in various ways, not only to master, and perform the music well – but to play it with invested, sincere feeling. In the treatment of the genre as uniquely, and desirably "accessible" and "fun," I think this comes across particularly clearly, as participants contrast it to other contemporary genres, or local scenes, where they feel alienated, judged, and even (in PT's case) angered by the more detached, evaluative approach.

Ironizing Irony?

One other piece worth noting here is that participants sometimes explicitly expressed a consciousness, and indeed sometimes a conflicted-ness about the appropriation they were engaged in, which I think complicates the expressions of "distinction" that were present as well. In the liner notes to Andy Friedman and the Other Failures' *Weary Things*, for example, friend of the band David Gates writes:

No one's fooling anybody: it's clear that this music isn't even *pretending* to be the naïve roadhouse rockabilly it's pretending to be pretending to be. (Gates 2009)

Or, in an interview with *New York Magazine*, Defibulators' lead singers Bug Jennings and Erin "Bru" call out the element of irony in their music:

In the way they re-create the barroom swing of the Hank era, the Defibulators and their fellow indie-country bands present themselves as more authentic than, say, Taylor Swift. But while *Corn Money* has moments of unvarnished beauty (“Your Hearty Laugh”), it also includes a degree of *Hee Haw*–style cornpone (note [Metalbelly’s] long underwear [featured in the press picture published with the article]). So what is their music: paean or put-on? “It’s not ironic, what we’re doing,” insists Bru. “We’re not making fun of [country music].” Jennings arches his brow. “Or *are* we?” Noting Bru’s disapproval, he adds, “We’re not making fun of it. We’re *having* fun with it.” Sighing, Bru sums up the mystery that is their world: “It’s kind of hard to describe to people.”” (Browne 2009)

An excerpt from my interview with AG is particularly revealing in this regard, and worth quoting at length. Toward the end of our conversation, after a brief discussion about the audience for the Brooklyn country scene, and for more commercially successful, national acts (mainstream, or alternative country) in New York, AG began to talk about how “curious” he was about how his own band might “go over” outside of New York, and particularly, in areas that he considered to be socially and culturally closer to country music. Here AG seemed to me to be admitting, and indeed trying to *emphasize* to a certain degree, that he has an awareness of the appropriation in which he’s engaged. He said, in fact, that he is “tormented” by the thought that he may be “faking something” in playing country music. And he went on to distinguish his own practice, which he considered to take a more measured, and carefully autobiographical approach (using references from his own family history in a Midwestern city, for example), from the practice of others, who adopted “country” styles and references more freely. He said he found the latter approach “offensive,” and akin to “minstrelsy”:

AG: I am kind of curious...how this stuff would go over in a place like, say, Mississippi, or Texas, or Kentucky... I don’t know, it gets into, like, authenticity, I guess...if you want to get philosophical about it... I don’t know. Sometimes I’m plagued by these thoughts: “Am I faking something?” You know, because I

didn't grow up in some holler...in the shadow of the Appalachians or something?...

...Like, I would never pretend to be a cowboy, and do that whole schtick... I wouldn't do the whole fake accent thing. I mean I think there's definitely a twang that probably comes out more when I sing. But...I wouldn't get up and do the sort of minstrel show, like...[with a heavy southern accent] "Aw shucks, I just came into New York City." ...I've met some people who do that kind of thing, and generally it falls flat pretty quick...

I was laughing with my bass player, like: "I like to think we could go play Arkansas or something and...not get our asses beaten too bad!" [Laughs.]

...It's a fine line. Because I feel like...I enjoy the genre, and I enjoy writing it... [But] I don't want to be some retro guy that pretends it's 1945 and I dress like Hank Williams... I like to sort of apply it to stuff that's...going on, or stuff that I know. Like I wouldn't write something about growing up in a shack in the Blue Ridge Mountains, because I didn't do that, and I think it's offensive to people who did... They don't really need me pretending on their behalf... [But] I'll write about...guys who get up and work in the steel mill for a living, because...those are the guys I grew up with. You know, there's a lot of stuff you could apply... I mean I guess everybody decides that for themselves... But I *would* be interested... I have a fantasy of...putting together a tour...maybe like a bunch of us, and seeing what's out there.

While this conflictedness may be argued to represent a kind of "second order irony" in some sense (David Gates' remarks in particular have something of that flavor), I think it also demonstrated a sensitivity to the class politics involved in the appropriation – and indeed a genuine desire to narrow the gap between these two social and cultural worlds.

Chapter Six: Conclusions

In the last three chapters, I have outlined some of the major characteristics and themes I found in the Brooklyn Country scene, and in each case I have highlighted a discourse about and negotiation of class in play. In Chapter Three, I explored discussions and expressions of musical (and related) tastes within the scene, highlighting their major themes: a simultaneously expressed preference for “classic” styles and an “innovative” approach, and a broader opposition to “mainstream-ness” and “commercialism” or “commodification.” I argued that, in addition to “expressing or betraying” a broadly middle-class habitus on their own, these discussions and expressions revealed a more complex and ambivalent articulation of class positioning. Specifically, I suggested that they alternately articulated alignment with and rejection of both the higher and lower ends of the class spectrum, in the form of a range of pseudo class categories: a kind of “working-class,” or “folk” category, and a consumer “mass” category, as well as an “executive” or “moneyed” class category, and a “creative” or “knowledge” class category.

Chapter Four looked at the configuration and treatment of the figures of “country” and “city” in the scene, focusing on the ways in which Brooklyn was treated in these terms as the symbolic and geographic location of the scene. I demonstrated how Brooklyn was configured as a kind of urban, but ruralized space, imbued with many of the positive characteristics of the “country” – being framed as peaceful and verdant, intimate, and community oriented, for example. And I illustrated how Manhattan, by contrast, was framed resolutely as “the city,” and configured as dirty, crowded,

impersonal, and competitive, as well as overrun with commercial incentives and culture. I suggested that in this discourse, there was a grappling with a broad structure/force, something like capitalism in play (this was particularly clear in the treatments of Brooklyn's "gentrification"). But, I argued that there was also a specific discourse about class embedded here, one that called up a set of pseudo-class categories that were similar to those highlighted in the chapter on taste, and that treated both the lower and higher ends of that spectrum in a similarly ambivalent way.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I explored the presence and role of both irony and sincerity in the Brooklyn Country scene, particularly in terms of how they were used in the engagement with, and treatment of country music, and the broader social and cultural world referenced in and by it. I argued that through these treatments, and particularly through the constant *interplaying* of them, Brooklyn Country participants articulated both distance from and closeness to "country" and its referents, including as one key part its class associations. With various kinds of irony, I argued, participants expressed a careful distance from the genre, and particularly its more dominantly denigrated associations and tropes, such as those of the "redneck" or "rube," for example. And with various kinds of sincerity – in the form of reverence, serious artistic regard, as well as a more straightforward joy in their participation – my interlocutors expressed closeness to the genre and its associations as well. They studied the music and its history carefully, and expressed a great deal of respect for its musicians, for example, or valorized the genre generally for its "accessibility," "inclusiveness," and emphasis on "fun." And they took their own songwriting and playing in the genre seriously as artistic projects. Here again, then, I highlighted a tendency toward ambivalent movement or maneuvering in class

identification.

As noted, my interlocutors in the Brooklyn country scene were in many ways in relatively powerful positions in terms of class. Though there was some variability in backgrounds, social trajectories, and contemporary circumstances, they each had capital – whether in the form of money, education, skills, knowledge, or “taste” – that marked them as on some kind of “middle” ground. But, I’ve argued that an array of structural and historical forces – both “cultural” and material – have rendered middle class standing inherently unstable in the contemporary United States. And I’ve suggested that this instability is in evidence in the way my interlocutors seemed to experience, and negotiate their class positioning.

As discussed in Chapter Two, a range of factors make middle class positioning anxious, broadly speaking, at the level of meaning in the contemporary United States. On the one hand, as the hegemonic American class category, “middle-class-ness” is at once a highly desirable location, and one whose terms of inclusion are extremely opaque. This makes any secure sense of belonging to the category very difficult from the start. On the other hand, because the primary form of capital held by middle class subjects is *cultural*, effort must constantly be made to build and maintain it, in the long term as well as the day-to-day. And there is always a risk that one may fail, or that the value of what one “has” in this regard will diminish.

Additionally, many of the more material resources held by and available to middle class subjects in the United States have been broadly put at risk since the late 1970s – particularly in the areas of money and work. And this has meant that the security of many peoples’ standing in these terms has become much more uncertain. Broadly

speaking, under the “deindustrialization” of the U.S. economy, a large-scale shift to “neoliberal” social and economic policy models, changes in a range of corporate structures and practices, and an astronomical rise in personal debt, among other factors, middle class subjects are rapidly losing ground in a very tangible way. They are losing jobs, or benefits, or they are failing to advance. They are working more for less pay, and racking up crushing debts. And they are seeing the social supports of their government dwindle. And all this while those at the top end of the class spectrum are succeeding like never before. At this writing (early 2012), these circumstances have become even more magnified by the bursting of the real estate bubble, the 2008 financial crisis, as well as the recession, spike in unemployment and corporate bailouts that followed it.

I’ve argued that these factors together create a significant amount of anxiety about inclusion in the middle class, and a large amount of effort spent striving, negotiating, and contesting, and so on. And what I suggest is in evidence in this scene is a complex display of that kind of striving and negotiating, focused within the context of a particular nexus of social and cultural activity. What I have been trying to draw out in each of the preceding chapters is a dynamic within this activity of “alternativity.” In each case, I’ve suggested that there is a distinct tendency toward ambivalence, hedging, or even duplicity where class is concerned. I propose that this dynamic might be considered a kind of “playing the middle” in terms of class: a complex dance in which participants simultaneously aligned themselves with, and opposed themselves to both sides of the class spectrum. By framing “alternativity” as a characteristic structure of feeling, and tactic for negotiating class on the part of middle-class subjects, I suggest that the notion both captures a key aspect of the experience of class from this nebulously defined and

unstable middle ground, but also a key tool for navigating that terrain – useful in its flexibility.

In an essay addressing the effects of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks on discourses of class identity in the United States – and particularly the role that a (re-) emergent formation valorizing the (white, male) “blue collar hero” played in the huge success of the roughly “alternative country” soundtrack to the Coen brothers’ film, *O Brother Where Art Thou?* – Aaron Fox suggests that “the alternative” is a modern “figure of discourse” that “demands interrogation” as such (Fox 2005). “The alternative,” he suggests is “a compelling figure of culture in modernity,” which marks “a key tactical *habitus* of a certain kind of classed modern subject, at once empowered and confounded by the spectrum of choices offered up for consumption, and just as quickly replaced by new choices” (Ibid., 165). And he notes the use of “the alternative” in marking a wide array of social and cultural domains: not just a broader array of musics, but also medicine, media, marriage, or the more far- reaching “lifestyle.”

I would generally agree with this assertion, and indeed, would suggest that “the alternative” is one in a *suite* of such figures functioning roughly in the way Fox describes – a suite that includes other broad categories like “the independent” as well as a whole range of other modifiers, which tend to be used to classify more specific cultures or practices, but that ultimately serve to indicate their inclusion in the broader realm of the “alternative.” The “DIY,” the home- or hand-made, the “organic,” “slow,” and “local,” the “hole-in-the-wall,” “mom and pop,” and “boutique,” among others, are all in many ways analogous (or as Bourdieu would say, “homologous”) formations: each with its own terms, objects, specific meanings and values, but bearing some distinctly similar

dispositions and characteristics. I see the Brooklyn Country scene as one example in this broad range of “alternative” cultures, and hope that this text serves as one contribution toward the “interrogation” of the larger formation. I would indeed suggest that this example may be useful to thinking about that broader set of discourses and practices in the sense that, through its engagement with country music in particular, it highlights the class meanings, and the class politics that tend to characterize this “alternative” space.

Sherry Ortner (Forthcoming, 2013) makes a compelling case that the emergence of “independent” film in the late 1980s was tied broadly to the neoliberalization of the U.S. economy, and resulting polarization of the class structure – drawing out a broad range of ways in which the genre/”scene” reflects, or represents a grappling with these shifts. And she suggests that this formation was “only one piece of a larger set of changes in the public culture” that registered these transformations – referencing 1990s “grunge” music, and postmodernist architecture in particular as analogous examples (13). She argues that, while the polarization of wealth in the U.S. began in the 1970s, it was not widely recognized until later: “...the issue of increasing inequality only began to become news starting in the late 1980s, when it began to be tracked in both academic studies and in the media” (16). And indeed, she emphasizes that the gap has grown dramatically more cavernous since that time. Ortner therefore suggests that the emergence of these new cultural forms specifically in the late 1980s and early 1990s is not at all coincidental.

In understanding and theorizing the broader “alternative” formation, this argument is particularly useful. It is notable, and probably also not coincidental, that the broader genre of “alternative country,” to which I see the Brooklyn scene as closely tied

in various ways, emerged and flourished around this same time – as discussed in Chapter 1. And many of the other “alternative” cultures and practices I reference above have cropped up in this era as well. Ortner describes this range of public cultural formations, along with a more straightforward set of prevalent anxieties and fears – about job security, or downward mobility, for example – as part of a broader “post-American Dream culture” (21). This formulation is useful as well, for the ties it makes to a broader set of practices, experiences, and affects that have emerged as characteristic of middle class positioning in the contemporary moment.

In addition to attempting to contribute to the theorization of “alternative” practices with this text, I also hope to contribute, in a very small way, to the broader (I would say, still continuing) effort to “bring class back in” and/or to rethink it in social and cultural theory as something less “objective” and “structural,” and more experienced, negotiated and “made” in the social and cultural lives of acting subjects. I think class is often hard to “see” because of its theoretical history, as well as its specific hegemonic erasure in American discourse. But I think it remains a highly salient category of social and cultural life, and demands continued interrogation – as well as careful progressive rethinking – as such. Seeing middle-class-ness can, as discussed, be especially difficult, which, combined with its hegemonic status in the United States, and particularly its increasing polarization under ongoing contemporary social and economic shifts, makes it an especially important category for continued analysis. I also think that the study of its class politics in particular, and their dense, and often contradictory character might play an important role much more broadly in the effort to forge more effective social and political projects in the United States. I would indeed suggest that the concomitant

articulations of empathy and disdain seen in the examples laid out in this case, in particular, resonate with a much broader array of contradictions in middle class politics and life, and a critical look at their workings and investments might prove productive.

At this writing, the Brooklyn Country scene continues to exist and most of my interlocutors are still participating. Its presence is not quite as robust as it was at the time of my research: as I've noted in places throughout the text, a number of venues have closed or moved to new locations, some of the events have decreased in frequency, or ceased meeting, and a handful of participants have moved, or moved on – going to graduate school, for example, or choosing to focus more on their home lives or careers, or on new musical projects. But most of the scene's central organizers are still playing and putting on shows, most of the bands continue to perform and release new records, and their concerts continue to draw enthusiastic crowds. It is uncertain what the longevity of the scene will ultimately be, and I suspect that many of its current participants will drop out or move on. But as the fate of the middle class remains in question, and the social and cultural conditions of its existence fraught with instability, I also suspect that some version of this scene, or at least the broader set of dispositions, tastes, values, and practices, displayed within in will persist.

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Appendix A

Figure 1, Show flyer for The Merles:



Figure 2, flyer for July 2007 Brooklyn County Fair:



Figure 3, show flyer, The Defibulators:



Figure 4, CD from Alex Battles' *At the End of the Night* (with applied grooves and label to emulate the look and texture of an LP):

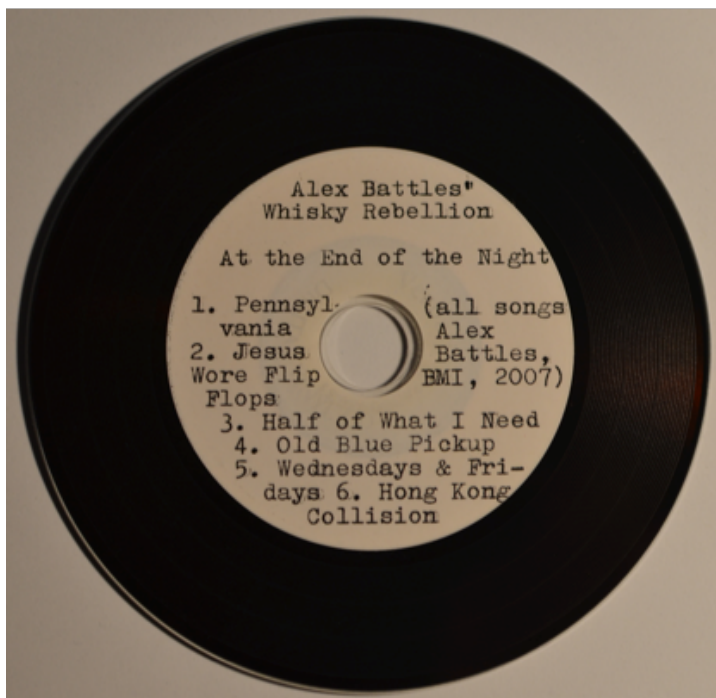


Figure 5, CD and jacket from The Two Man Gentlemen Band's *Heavy Petting*:



Figure 6, album cover, CD and jacket from The Two Man Gentlemen Band's *Great Calamities*:

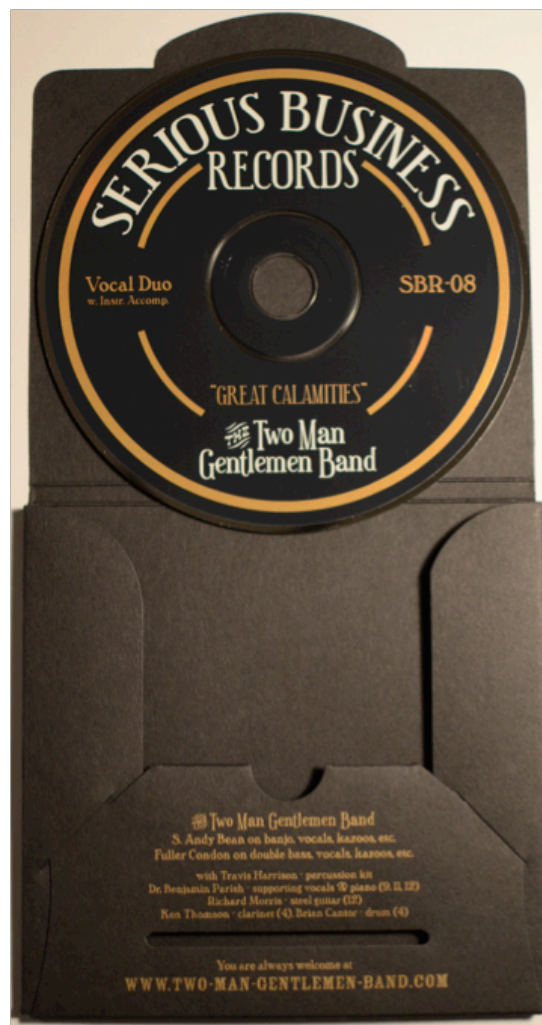
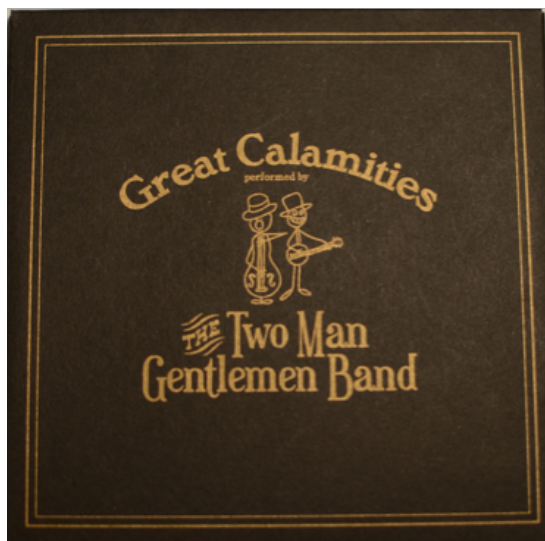


Figure 7, CD and insert from Brownbird Rudy Relic's *Anti-Stereo Acoustic Holler Blues*:



Figure 8, album cover, CD and insert from Kara Suzanne and the Gojo Hearts' *Aumsville*:



Figure 9, album cover (front and back), and insert from The Younger Sister Band's *No Desire*:



Figure 9, cont.

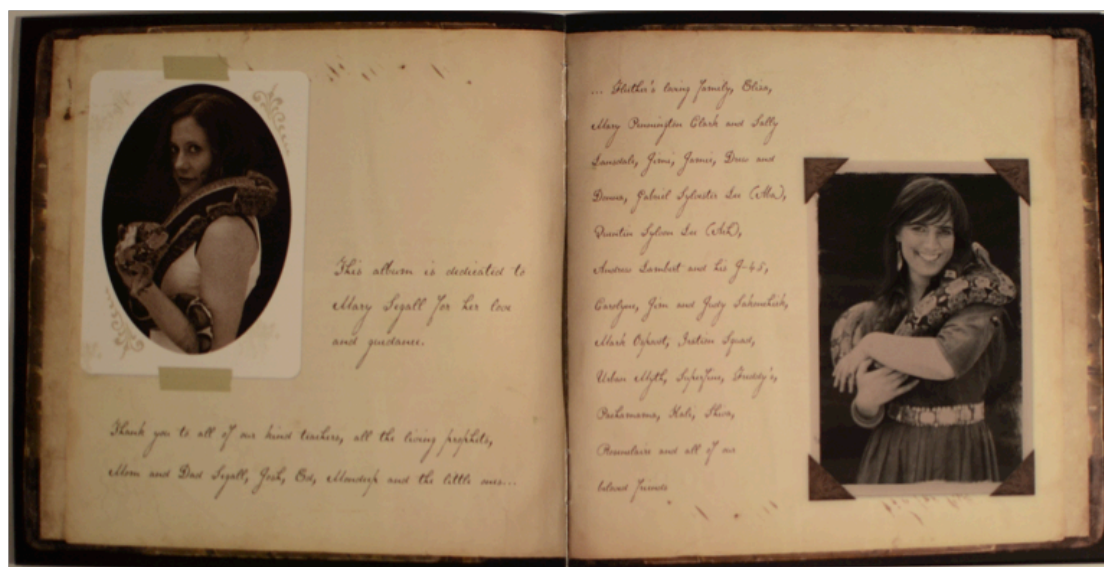


Figure 10, album insert from The Roulette Sisters' *Nerve Medicine*:



Figure 11, album cover and insert from Jan Bell and the Maybells' *White Trash Jenny*:

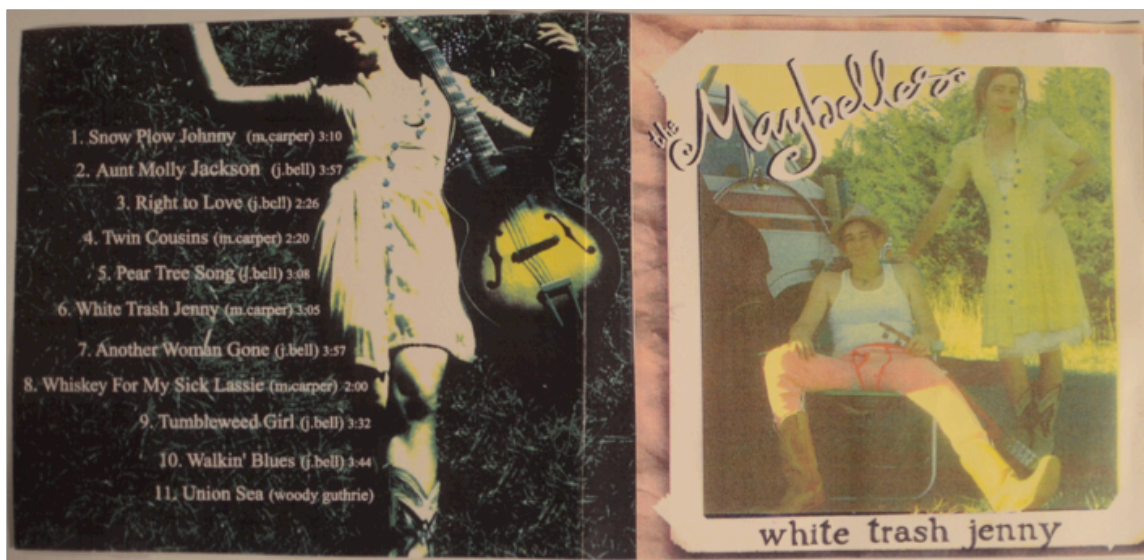


Figure 12, album insert from Sweet William's *Gone to Seed*:



Figure 13, album insert from Rensch's *Life in Mean Season*:



Appendix B

Figure 1, album insert from the Doc Marshalls' *Honest For Once*:



Figure 2, album cover from The Blue State Band's *The Blue State Band*:



Figure 3, press photo for the Jack Grace Band:



Figure 4, album insert from M Shanghai String Band's *From the Air*:



Figure 5, album cover and insert from Andy Friedman & the Other Failures' *Weary Things*:



Figure 6, album insert from Andy Friedman's *Taken Man*:



Figure 7, album insert from The Blind Pharoahs' *Under a Wampus Moon*:



Figure 8, album cover from Hogzilla's *Lost My Mind*:

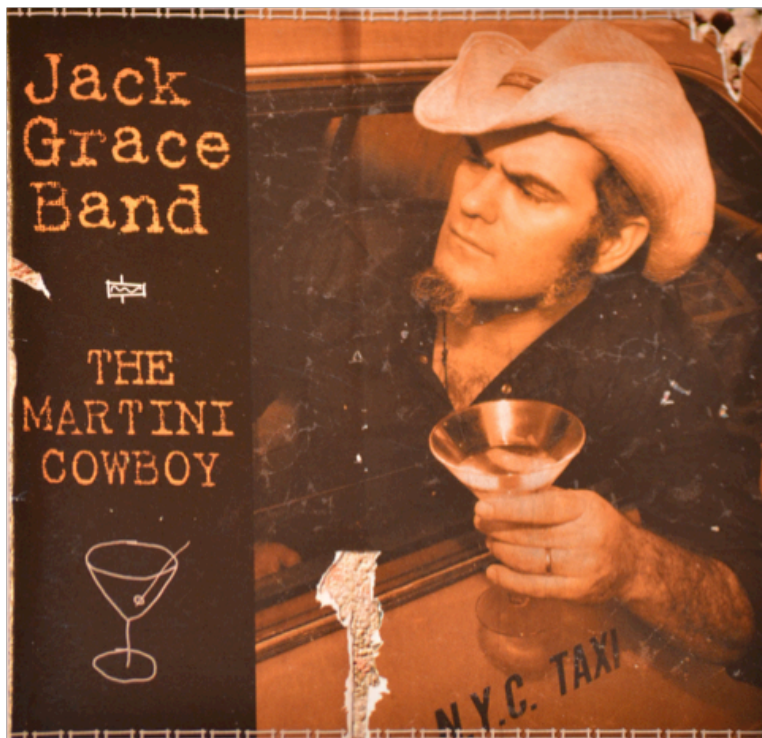


Figure 9, album cover from Uncle Leon and the Alibi's *Roller Derby Saved My Soul*:



Appendix C

Figure 1, album cover (front and back) from Jack Grace Band's *The Martini Cowboy*:



Appendix D

Figure 1, *The Defibulators Coloring Book*, front and back covers:

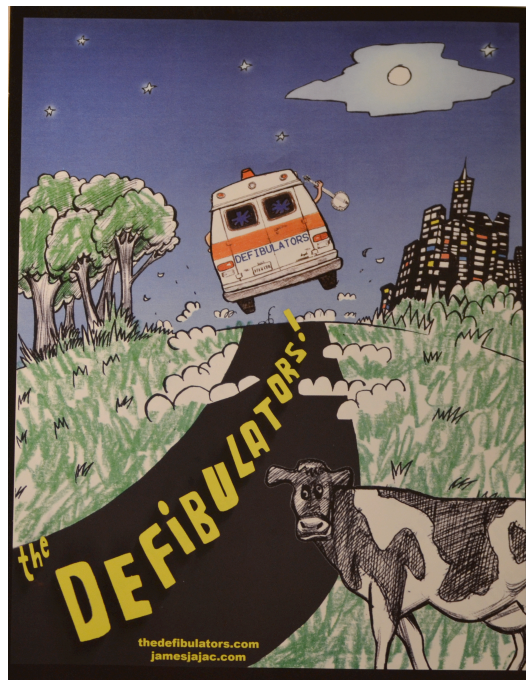
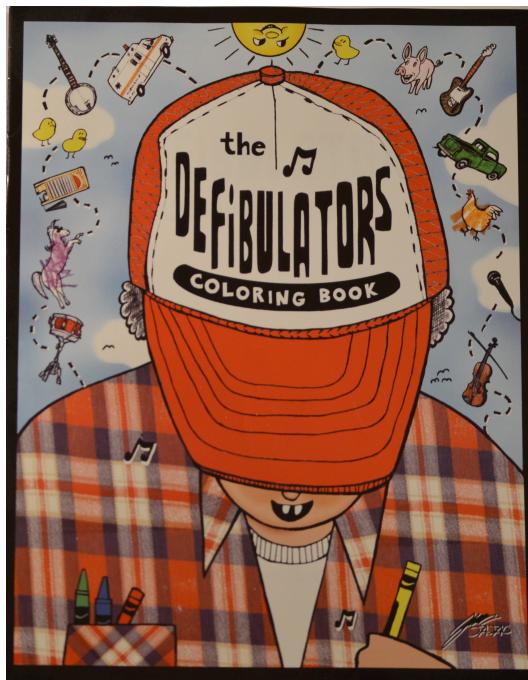


Figure 2, The Defibulators press photo:



Figure 3, still from The Defibulators' "Corn Money Promotional Video":

